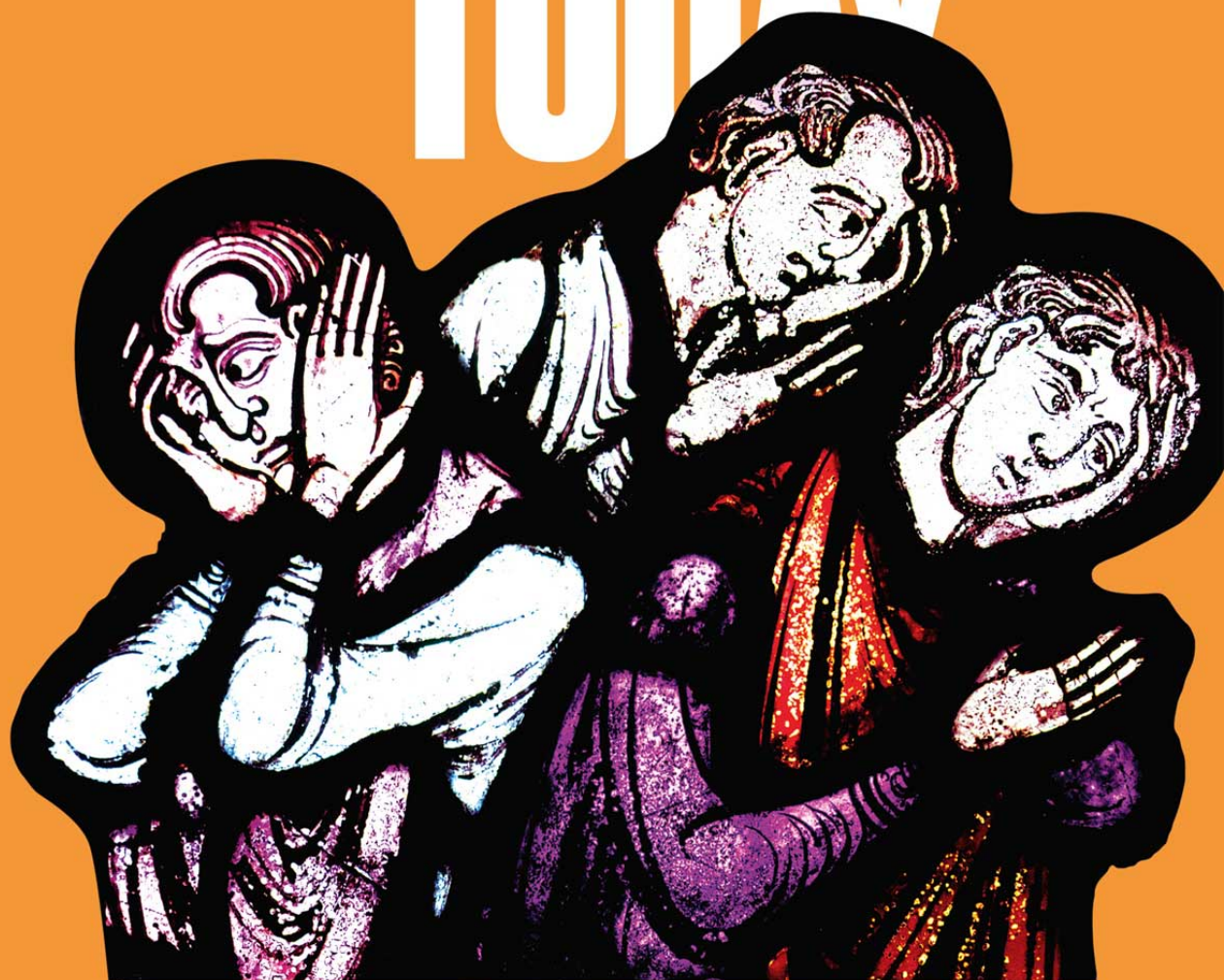


June 2021
Vol 71 Issue 6

HISTORY TODAY



Black Death: the new normal

Alfred the Great, England's founding father?

The adult world of Victorian children

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FROM THE EDITOR WHAT'S IN A NAME?

When people are returned to the historical record, they regain their humanity.

Paul Lay



The sorrow and the pity: Jean-Marie Lustiger, a French cardinal of Jewish heritage, visits Auschwitz, 23 June 1983.

Auschwitz Memorial is a Twitter feed I was introduced to by the novelist and critic Linda Grant, which is run by staff at the Auschwitz Museum. Each entry – and at least one is posted daily – starts with a date, usually that of the person's birth: '9 April 1938: Jewish twin girls Annette and Paulette Sklarz were born in Metz.' '3 May 1938: A Czech Jewish boy, Ivan Fink, was born in Brandys nad Labem.' '3 May 1930: A Dutch Jewish girl, Meriam Kok, was born in Amsterdam.' These are followed by another date, that of their death at Auschwitz or another Nazi concentration camp. The entries are always accompanied by a photograph: sometimes they are the all too familiar official images taken by the camp authorities of people in the characteristic striped uniform or, more frequently, they are photographs of people living another life pre-war.

The images of children are, understandably, the most affecting. Some of them were born in 1943, or 1942: toddlers soon to face a barely imaginable fate, many of them from the transports at Drancy on the

outskirts of Paris. But all have a brief biography, the adult entries usually mentioning their trade – furrier, clerk, barber, tailor – which leaves much for the reader to imagine. And all look straight at the camera. If the eyes are the window to the soul, then it is never more true than in these photographs.

The task that *Auschwitz Memorial* has set itself will take many years to achieve, such was the scale of the murder. But it will return those forgotten back to the historical record, which is the opposite of what the Nazis wished: to reduce a people to mere numbers.

It was Stalin who said that the death of one man is a tragedy, the death of millions a statistic. By recovering the names and faces of 'statistics' we are able to restore their humanity. This can also be applied to the Atlantic slave trade, the genocide in the Belgian Congo, to Stalin and Mao's murderous regimes and to today's Uighurs and Yazidi. A name returns a semblance of humanity to those who have endured the inhuman and from whom our gaze should never turn away.





FOUNDATIONS FLAMING JUNE

A Victorian homage to a Renaissance master became one of the world's most reproduced images.

Flaming June, by Frederic Leighton, 1895, Museo de Arte de Ponce, Puerto Rico.

Frederic Leighton, President of the Royal Academy, was one of the most celebrated painters of the Victorian era when he painted his most famous work – and his swan song – *Flaming June* in 1895. It was a homage to Michelangelo's statue, *Night*, created for the New Sacristy of the Basilica of San Lorenzo in Florence around 1530, which Leighton considered to be one of the greatest achievements in western civilisation.

While Michelangelo's reclining figure is made of cool, solemn marble, Leighton's is a rush of warm, carnal colour: the saffron gauze shift draped around the curled up, s-shaped body; the long auburn hair; the blush of the cheek that suggests the woman knows she is being watched and is only feigning slumber. The creases and contours are compressed in the centre, like a flower in full bloom in a vaguely classical, Mediterranean setting. The oleander in the top corner symbolises the proximity of sleep and death.

Flaming June was bought soon after the artist's death in 1896 by the canny editor of the *Graphic* magazine, who offered postcards of it to his readers. They bought them in their thousands and it remains one of the most widely reproduced of all paintings.

Despite its popularity with the Victorian public, the works of Leighton fell out of fashion. When it was offered to major galleries for a song in the 1960s there were no takers until a Puerto Rican businessman, Luis A. Ferré, bought it for his new museum where the work that Samuel Courtauld called 'the most wonderful painting in existence' now resides.

LETTERS

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Menasseh ben Israel, by Rembrandt van Rijn, 1636.

Look at This

As the author rightly observes (Foundations, April 2021), no one knows why Hans Holbein the Younger painted *The Body of the Dead Christ in the Tomb*, the most striking of all his works. But its very uniqueness and the evident passion with which it was executed speak to us more eloquently than documentary evidence. Earlier treatments of the descent from the Cross or the entombment that Holbein would probably have known (works by Mantegna and Grunewald, for example) ‘explain’ the death of ‘Jesus Nazarenus Rex Judaeorum’ as incidents in a story. The viewer is urged to identify with grieving disciples: attention is to some extent distracted from the just-dead body which is almost sanitised, as though the wounds have already been tended.

Holbein’s image, by contrast, does not allow us to take a step backwards to ponder the biblical narrative. It rubs our noses in reality. ‘Make no mistake,’ it says, ‘this God-man really died, as you and I must die.’

Contemporaries in the violently combative 1520s were propounding their versions of the Easter story and backing up those versions with denunciation, persecution and war. What a young, impatient, angry artist was saying in this intensely personal painting (it was not, after all, a commissioned work) was: ‘Put away your books, your swords, your sermons and your bonfires. Just look at this.’

*Derek Wilson
Bideford, Devon*

Welcoming Village

The article about Cromwell and the Jews (‘The Chosen Peoples’, April) reminded me that there is a Jew’s Lane between the Black Country settlements of Upper and Lower Gornal. This is not the obvious place for a Jewish community to settle and I would be intrigued to know more.

*Martin Edwards
Birmingham*

Top Score

On the Spot has become a platform to proclaim progressive academic credentials. With Shadi Bartsch (April) seeking to destroy the Christian Church at one of its foundational moments, Paul’s conversion on the road to Damascus, has the professor accrued the highest score yet in this game of one-upmanship?

*Patrick Mullane
via email*

Ever More War

In reference to Head to Head (April), a number of years ago, while discussing new titles pertaining to the American Civil War, the Americanist in the University of Sheffield’s history department said to me: ‘We’ve done it year by year, campaign by campaign, battle by battle, day by day; eventually we’ll be doing it bullet by bullet.’

*Graeme Innes-Johnstone
Elland, West Yorkshire*

Correction

In Head to Head (May 2021) we reproduced an image of Professor Ada Ferrer-i-Carbonell not Professor Ada Ferrer of the City University of New York. Apologies to both.

HEAD TO HEAD

HAS THE EXPERIENCE OF THE PANDEMIC CHANGED YOUR VIEWS ON THE NATURE OF HISTORICAL CRISES?

The past year has been one few will forget. But what insights does it offer historians?

Alex von
Tunzelmann

‘The last year has underlined the interconnected nature of events’



Author of Blood and Sand: Suez, Hungary and the Crisis that Shook the World (Simon & Schuster, 2016)

Strictly, the answer to this question is no: the facts of this pandemic and the response have not changed the facts or natures of previous crises. More broadly, though, watching a global crisis unfold in real time has made me think about how I approach historical crises in three ways: focus, connections and diversity of experience.

The nature of crises is that they're incredibly complicated. The 'hot' period of the Suez Crisis lasted around 16 days. It took me more than three years to research and write about it, because so many different powers and interests were involved all around the world: it coincided with the Hungarian Rebellion, threatening to draw the Soviet Union and the US into a Third World War. Future historians will have to reconstruct the pandemic from a global mountain of information, including social media as well as conventional media. My advice to them (and to

myself) is to focus; it's better to tell one story well than to be overwhelmed by the material.

The experience of the last year has underlined the interconnected nature of events in a crisis. For instance, I'm interested in the phenomenon of conspiracy theories and denialism, which crop up in a lot of historical crises. It would be hard to tell the story of Covid deniers without rooting it in the last couple of decades of the 'anti-vaxx' movement, the expansion of conspiracy theories, the erosion of traditional media, the decline of trust in government and so on. The nature of crises and crisis responses is that they do not happen in a vacuum. Exploring these connections makes it even harder for a historian to maintain focus, but that is part of the challenge.

Finally, diversity of experience. The pandemic has brought suffering to many. Yet there are large numbers of people who are quite indifferent to this. There are those who have benefited materially from the pandemic and those who seek to deny or minimise its effects. For historians of past crises, this is a reminder that human stories are never simple; we must never presume a single response. The nature of human experiences and opinions is always astonishingly varied.

Human stories are never simple: we must never presume a single response

Jessie Childs

‘It has deepened my understanding of the emotional response to such events’



Author of God’s Traitors: Terror and Faith in Elizabethan England (Vintage, 2014)

When the vestrymen of the burnt-out church of St Sepulchre’s gathered together after the Great Fire of London in 1666 they established several things very quickly: a new way of meeting, a list of the most vulnerable pensioners and a set of safety measures. They relit the streets, fixed the fire engines and recast the molten bell-metal into ‘sound and tuneable bells’.

Those impulses – to regroup, protect and come together as a community – have been iterated by the pandemic. From clapping on British doorsteps to singing from Italian balconies, a sense of *campanilismo* (loyalty to the bell tower) has been strong. The pandemic has also reinforced the view that most people, if faced with an existential threat, will prioritise security over liberty. Hobbes still matters.

It is no surprise either that the pandemic has exposed and deepened the cracks in society and caused further stresses to the economy, healthcare and

education. It has not, therefore, changed my views on the nature of historical crises, which are in any case varied, contingent and hard to distil, but it has deepened my understanding of the emotional responses to such events.

Throughout the lockdowns, I’ve been writing about the British Civil Wars of the 1640s. A combination of natural and man-made factors made the 17th century a ‘global crisis’, in Geoffrey Parker’s phrase. Those who lived through it sometimes seem like iron men and women. It is easier now to appreciate their anger, confusion, envy, apparent apathy and extraordinary resilience. Having grappled with home-schooling, I’m more forgiving of lacunae in registers and diaries. Contemporaries spoke of their ‘distracted’ times. I’d always thought it was a euphemism, but now I realise that it is exactly the right word.

Past crises show that cities and states can rise from the ashes of catastrophe, but it takes inspired leadership and an awful lot of work. The British test and trace scheme was abysmal, the vaccine rollout magnificent. It may be that we can ‘build back better’, as the slogan goes, find a new equilibrium and perhaps even tread more lightly upon the earth. But at this point it is too soon to say.

People, if faced with an existential threat, will prioritise security over liberty

Anthony Barnett

‘It makes me think what is happening now is different’



Author of The Lure of Greatness: England’s Brexit and America’s Trump (Unbound, 2017)

Yes and no. No: historic crises were as they were. Pandemics usually intensify but do not change existing forms of rule. With the exception of the Black Death, which appears to have transformed the value of labour because of the extent of the losses, natural disasters such as plagues do not alter the nature of a society. They are a challenge that amplifies existing problems but do not pose a systemic crisis.

Thus, in the 20th century, pandemics were still regarded as fate: the flu pandemic of 1919–22 killed more people than the First World War but left little lasting legacy. Similarly, the pandemics of 1957 and 1968. If you have not heard of them, that proves the point. AIDS and Ebola were lethal for the communities impacted, but did not become a ‘historic crisis’.

This pandemic is different. It has not led me to alter my view about what has happened in the past, but it makes me think what is happening now is different.

Until recently, all that could be done was slow infection

rates: fatalism was unavoidable. As humanity became capable of genuine self-organisation, a cult of fatalism was generated to protect rulers from popular agency. Called 'market fundamentalism' or 'neoliberalism', it insisted government was the problem and market forces had to be obeyed to achieve a better life.

Economically, its success ended with the financial meltdown of 2008-09. Now, politically and socially, the hegemonic theory of government has been overturned by a micro-organism. Tremendous advances in medical science and technology meant that Covid could be treated. In 1919 there were not intensive care units able to treat patients under 24-hour sedation. There was not, therefore, the danger of life-saving wards being overwhelmed in the same way. Governments had to act.

President Macron has said: 'We are going to nationalise the wages and the profit and loss accounts of almost all our businesses ... It's against all the dogmas, but that's the way it is.' A huge effort will be made to rehabilitate the old order after its period in intensive-care, but it is unlikely to re-emerge unchanged – the pandemic has generated a historic crisis of its own.

A huge effort will be made to rehabilitate the old order after its period in intensive care

Camilla Townsend

'The pandemic has made more vivid the disaster that unfolded in the New World during the 16th century'



Author of Fifth Sun: a New History of the Aztecs (Oxford University Press, 2019)

Living through the pandemic has made more vivid the disaster that unfolded in the New World during the 16th century. Following contact with Europe and its viruses, the indigenous population of the Americas dropped by at least 85 per cent over the course of the first century. By the 1580s, some Spaniards feared that literally all the Native Americans would die.

Because of this horrific context, there has been a tendency on many modern people's part to speak of 'die-offs', to assert that around half the population would perish when an epidemic took place, or even to explain the conquest as a consequence of the fact that so many people were dying of disease that they couldn't fight back militarily.

But the Aztec-language histories do not speak of events in this way. Instead, they convey an abiding sadness. Now, I understand better why.

This past year, though most

of the world mitigated relatively successfully by keeping people at home, there were pockets that experienced Covid's full two per cent mortality rate; certain areas in New York City, for instance, or square-block areas in New Jersey, where I live. The sound of the sirens, the stories from my students' families and my own fear for loved ones combined to leave me feeling traumatised. But, a few months later, life had continued for most of us and we were finding ways to laugh again. Our smiles were shaky, but genuine.

In the 16th century, smallpox could kill between 20 and 30 per cent of those that caught it. More common diseases, such as whooping cough or measles, had lower mortality rates. There was no die-off that left whole towns empty overnight. Instead, people went through something like unmitigated Covid, then a few years later, Covid but ten times worse, then the next year, a bad flu season, then in a decade, something twice as bad. After decades of this, they felt so vulnerable, their psyches didn't know which way to turn. They focused on small victories. In a record in a small church in the 1620s, a man wrote: 'Today no one's child died.' The survivors still laughed sometimes the following year, but by then, their sense of themselves in relation to the universe had changed forever.

In a record in a small church in the 1620s, a man wrote: 'Today no one's child died'

HISTORY MATTERS





The Abode of Madness

The long history of No Man's Land, from lawlessness and desolation to hope and regrowth.
Maria Ogborn

'Like the face of the moon': *Oppy Wood 1917*, by John Nash, 1918.

The term *No Man's Land* comes with clear connotations of war, especially trench warfare on the Western Front. Yet the concept of 'none man's land', *nanemaslandes*, first appears in the Domesday Book of 1086, referring to the area that is now Hyde Park in London. The phrase as we know it today arose in the mid-14th century as *nomanneslond*, referring to what the *Oxford English Dictionary* describes as 'the name of a plot of ground lying outside the north wall of the city of London, the site of a place of execution'. It was also used more generally to describe land that was disputed, such as an area in Herefordshire that was contested between the monasteries of Westminster and St Albans in the 1400s and, as a result, is still called Nomansland Common today. It was also used to indicate areas considered beyond the realms of the law, often associated with loss or death, such as mass burial grounds or plague pits.

It is during the 20th century that the term took on its military connotations, most often associated with the First World War and the area of land between opposing armies that was unoccupied or uncontrolled. Often only several yards wide, these No Man's Lands of the Western Front were, according to poet Wilfred Owen, 'like the face of the moon, chaotic, crater-ridden, uninhabited, awful, the abode of madness'.

The term was first used during the First World War by Major General Sir Ernest Dunlop Swinton in his short story 'The Point of View'.

He describes the flames and searchlights highlighting:

In that wilderness of dead bodies – the dreadful 'No-Man's-Land' between the opposing lines – deserted guns showed up singly or in groups, glistening in the full glare of the beam or silhouetted in black against a ray passing behind.

Both during and after the war, these No Man's Lands provided the backdrop for art and literary works, including Erich Maria Remarque's novel *All Quiet on the Western Front* (1929) and *Storm of Steel* (1920) by Ernst Jünger.

The war poet Ewart Alan Mackintosh, killed at Cambrai in 1917, described these areas as where 'death or capture may lurk unseen' and Robert Bech wrote: 'We press with a noiseless tread, Thro' no mans land but the sightless dead.'

Just as the term developed a meaning for the men at the Front, these works meant it reached the minds of civilians and the families of those who were facing the horrors of war in foreign fields. They have embedded the term and these images in the collective memory to the present day and inform our ideas of the First World War.

Since 1918, No Man's Land has kept its military connotations, often representing militarised or demilitarised borders. Throughout the Cold War, the term was used to describe areas across the Iron Curtain, where miles of uninhabited land, officially owned by the countries of the Eastern Bloc, fell within a militarised zone. These areas were often guarded

by watchtowers, wire fencing and minefields, preventing civilians from fleeing to the West. Similarly, the term is often used to describe the Cyprus Buffer Zone, established by the United Nations. In 1974, civil war between Greek and Turkish factions on the island led to a coup by the Cyprus National Guard and then to Turkish military intervention. The UN set up a 180km-long buffer zone, cutting through the capital, Nicosia. Once heavily patrolled, it prevented crossings from one half of the island to the other.

The term has taken on further applications throughout the 20th century, being used to describe areas that are inhabited but whose inhabitants are seen as 'lawless' or beyond the realms of the law – more akin to its medieval usage. These are often poverty-stricken areas, such as a strip of land near Wilmette, Illinois that took on the name between the 1920s and 1940s. Money had poured in during the 1930s to develop the land and build a hotel, but when funds ran dry the area filled with casinos, liquor stores, ice cream and hot dog stands and small fireworks shops. It quickly became a 'slot-machine and kino sin centre' – a place of depravity that, according to the *Chicago Tribune*, 'was an area unpoliced, unrestricted and under no municipal control'. It was seen as so lawless that, when a fire broke out at one of its casinos in the early 1930s, neither of the neighbouring fire departments offered assistance or claimed jurisdiction over the land, leaving the building to burn to the ground.



Lawless: a section of the Berlin wall looking into No Man's Land, 8 September 1989.

‘Images of brave men going over the top into grim and lifeless stretches of land to fight the enemy have stood steadfast’

Over its millennium of use, ‘No Man’s Land’ has had military, environmental, cultural and even metaphorical uses, often being applied in a political or legal sense, but still brings with it connotations of fear, hopelessness, loss, lawlessness or death. It continues to spark images of the First World War and, thanks to modern films, images of brave men going over the top into grim and lifeless stretches of land to fight the enemy have stood steadfast.

In the future, could No Man’s Land also signify hope? The areas around sites of nuclear disasters such as Chernobyl that have been given the name have flourished in the

absence of people, as natural ecosystems have sprung back to life.

Similarly, after the First World War, even as the term gained prominence, the French government created the Zone Rouge, turning the once barren, devastated battlefields of Flanders and the Western Front into beautiful open countryside and areas of conservation, covered with poppies and wildflowers and home to vast war cemeteries that enable future generations to remember those who lost their lives.

Maria Ogborn has an MA in Military History from the University of Birmingham.

Trading Places

Women and the birth of England's stock market.

David Challis

When the government of England and Wales created the National Debt in 1694, those from the higher echelons of society were given opportunities to invest money. Through government bonds, lotteries and eventually publicly listed companies the stock exchange was born, effectively creating the modern market. In the alleys around the Bank of England, trading began in earnest and continued into the 18th century.

During the same period, the law of coverture effectively removed the right for a married woman to own property or take part in financial activities. Yet women investors accounted for between a third and a fifth of the total amount invested in the stock market during its early years. This is not to suggest that women experienced equality in the 18th-century stock exchange, but that, for those who were financially able, buying and selling stocks offered them a financial independence that helped to define their identity.

The records of public companies such as the South Sea Company or the Royal African Company reveal a pattern of significant female investment. Women made up roughly 30 per cent of the total amount invested in them and a similar proportion of the numbers of investors. And, once their money was invested, women did not passively rely on annual yields, but actively traded stocks as often as their male peers.

The fledgling stock market did not exclude women, simply because no one had thought to do so. Women took advantage of this 'oversight' and were

largely successful in the enterprise, making money far more regularly than losing it. As a result, stock trading became an almost unisex activity. Advertisements on the subject did not exclude women as they did for things such as the sale of property. Newspaper articles offering advice on how to trade would have been more than accessible for middle-class women in the early 1700s and the arithmetic required to trade was likely to be possessed by most of this class.

Women as the sole trader in their family were also not uncommon and Hester Pinney is one of the best-known examples. She was first involved in her family's lace-trading business, which operated from the Seven Stars tavern in the inner walk of the Royal Exchange during the late 1600s. Following her father's death, she moved into the stock exchange in 1705 and became one of the most well-documented female traders in the records. This is largely because of her extensive connections to other prominent families, such as the aristocratic Booth family, to whom she gave advice. Correspondence went back and forth with various men asking for her input and advice, which she provided. Pinney's nephew, Azariah, also relied on her for advice, once writing to ask her the meaning of the term 'sunk' and openly admitting 'I do not take in the London papers so knew nothing of it till your last letter', when referring to South Sea stock. Her brothers often commented on her financial acumen and pragmatism. There was always, however, an underlying tone of uneasiness

and suspicion about women dealing in the stock market and in their letters Pinney's own brothers sometimes took offence at her blunt speaking.

The level of financial independence and power that such women possessed also translated into a degree of power in companies. As shareholders, they were able to vote in general meetings and stand for positions as officers, giving them a greater political voice than ever before. Take, for example, Eleanor Curzon, the unmarried daughter of Sir Nathaniel Curzon, baronet. Allowed control of her own finances, she became heavily involved in the shareholder meetings of the York Buildings Company. She is, however, just one example among rafts of women engaging in company votes found in corporation documents.

Investing in the stock market was also seen as a patriotic act, as it often funded conflicts. Governments launched annuities to help finance numerous wars on the continent, which were marketed with a stress on one's patriotic duty to invest, something that their letters show these women were fully aware of. Sarah Churchill is a pertinent example. Better known for her connection to Queen Anne, she also acted as the sole trader for her family despite being married. She noted in a letter that:

I lent such sums to the government as reduced the interest from six per cent to four per cent; thinking it would have had a good effect for the security of the nation.



Ladies, some rich: playing card from a South Sea Bubble crash-themed pack, 1720s.

She translated her financial influence into direct political power, demonstrating her direct understanding and influence in political circles.

However, the involvement of women in the stock market was not a wholly progressive story. Only those with the financial means, which needed to be considerable, could engage in the exchange and, in its early years in particular, it was a very London-centric enterprise. Although this also applied to men, the consequences of marriage

meant that many women were unable to take up the pursuit. Sarah Churchill was an exception: Elizabeth Freke, for example, brought a considerable amount of money into her marriage but was not able to use it before her husband's death. Just one month after he died, though, she moved to London and invested in government annuities.

After the South Sea Bubble broke in 1720, which saw stock prices fall dramatically almost overnight, the morality of the stock market came into question. Many writers and satirists portrayed it as folly and conflated it with an immoral, irreligious lapse. Women bore the brunt of this and were quickly depicted as irrational and emotionally driven – even though their previous activities in the stock market had proven otherwise.

On a pack of South Sea Bubble-themed playing cards, women made up a third of the pack, generally portrayed as frivolous with their money – an embodiment of the loss of morality experienced during the crash. In artwork, the market itself was often portrayed as female, symbolising its unreliability, irrationality and temptation.

Despite all the gains women made in the stock exchange, this shift was never to be a widespread and permanent one. The stock exchange produced a paradoxical space for women in the 18th century, in which they were able to exercise formal agency, but it did not last.

David Challis is a journalist and historian.

Blood, Stones and Holy Bones

The spiritual power of medieval relics meant that Jerusalem, or a dragon, could be remade anywhere.

Mary Boyle



What do we miss when we describe a pilgrimage simply as travel to a destination – to Rome, or to Jerusalem? What makes a location worthy of pilgrimage? Medieval travellers explained: Chaucer's pilgrims headed for Canterbury, 'to seek the holy blissful martyr', Thomas Becket. Bernhard von Breydenbach, a German clergyman who published a hefty pilgrimage account in 1486, summarised his trip to Sinai as 'to the praiseworthy virgin and martyr St Katherine'. Though dead, these saints were as available for visiting as anyone living and, at the same time, their



‘Sundry folk’: pilgrims in front of the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem, from *Liber peregrinationis*, French, c.1410.

bones marked these places as holy. This is even starker in Katherine’s case: in life, she had no connection with Sinai. In death, her relics give it a distinct meaning, transcending even its biblical significance. Relics and medieval pilgrimage are thus intrinsically connected – but relics are much more than just holy bones and pilgrims’ relationships with them could be complicated.

William Wey, an Englishman who travelled twice to Jerusalem (1458, 1462) and once to Santiago de Compostela (1456), was so keen on relics that when he compiled ten reasons for Christians to visit the Holy

Land, the final one was a long list of the relics to be encountered en route. This list makes it clear how broad a heading ‘relics’ really was: it covered not only such predictable items as saints’ bodies and the accoutrements of the Passion (Longinus’ spear shaft, thorns from Christ’s crown), but also footprints in stone, marks on the ground from the Virgin’s milk, regular marvellous appearances of water and a folk miracle that had left no physical trace. When Wey returned, he constructed a replica Holy Sepulchre chapel at Edington Priory, where he placed the ‘relyks’ he had brought home.

These included stones from Calvary, the Holy Sepulchre, the place where St Helena discovered the Cross and the grotto in Bethlehem. Using these relics, Wey legitimised and sanctified his Wiltshire Jerusalem in much the same way that Compostela and Sinai authenticated their associations with James and Katherine.

These stone relics are probably similar to those acquired in 1506 by Thomas Larke, another English pilgrim and later confessor to Cardinal Wolsey. While Wey tells us what he did with the relics, Larke tells us how he got them. After dinner at the Franciscan monastery of Mount Sion, 'the warden rose from the board and took a basin full of folded papers with relics in each of them ... and gave every pilgrim he passed a paper with relics of the holy places about Jerusalem, which we took as devoutly as we could'. In this period, the Franciscans in Jerusalem were essentially operating a package business, seeking to ensure that every pilgrimage was as consistent as possible – including how they were described by returning pilgrims. Distributing souvenir relic sets was part of this process. When pilgrims took pieces of the Holy Land home, they literally brought back the Franciscan Jerusalem – and this is the Jerusalem which Wey constructed at Edington.

But how can mere stones from the ground qualify as relics? Breydenbach makes the case: Medieval Christians understood that honour was due to the bones of saints and the places where they spilled their blood. The faithful

'Medieval religion was not monolithic and not all pilgrims took an entirely uncritical approach to relics'

visited and venerated both.

It is therefore logical to honour in the same way the land which Christ hallowed with his life and death. Contact with a holy body or blood was a standard way of acquiring relic status and the entire Holy Land thus becomes a relic. This status becomes a defence for the entire practice of Holy Land pilgrimage: where relics exist, pilgrimage must follow. No wonder that its very stones had the power to create Wey's own Jerusalem.

But medieval religion was not monolithic and not all pilgrims took an entirely uncritical approach to relics. Arnold von Harff, a knight who set off from Cologne in 1496, could be rather cynical on the subject. He makes no bones about highlighting duplicates, noting the multiple resting places of St Matthias, the many arms of St Thomas and the two heads of St James. Even without the duplicates, Harff would have been on the alert after a journey down the Nile, where he encountered crocodiles for the first time and learned about the local merchants' wheeze of selling the skins abroad. Harff then realised that he had seen a crocodile skin hanging in chains in the church of Santa Maria in Portico, where he was told that 'it was the skin of a

dragon, which I believed, until I found out it was a lie'. Upon reaching Santiago, near the end of his lengthy pilgrimage, Harff attempted to bribe the shrine guardians into showing him the saint's remains. They responded that 'whoever did not believe that the holy body of the Apostle St James the Great lay in the high altar, and doubted, and wanted to see the body, would immediately become as mad as a rabid dog'. Harff, rather succinctly, simply comments: 'Thus I understood what they meant.' But it would be a mistake to view Harff as a sceptic, or even as some kind of proto-reformer. He does not ascribe malign intent to anyone within the Church, simply commenting on any particularly dubious relics: 'I leave the errors of priests up to God to decide.' And the existence of various duplicates does not affect his interest in other relics, which he lists enthusiastically – including a Parisian unicorn horn. Being devout did not preclude investigation – however poorly it might be received – nor did an enquiring mind preclude an eager engagement with relics when grounds for suspicion were not offered. Ultimately, for Harff, as for many other medieval pilgrims, relics were extraordinarily powerful devotional objects, capable of turning an ordinary location into a place of pilgrimage.

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The Year of the Sepoy Revolt

How events in British India were leveraged in the debate over slavery.
Nicholas Simon

As Abraham Lincoln noted, the United States in the years leading up to the Civil War was a 'house divided against itself'. This disunion is often generalised as a fracture between North and South. But, before secession the growing divide was between determined abolitionists and their equally determined opponents, engaged in a battle over public opinion. This was certainly true in 1857, when Indian sepoys revolted against British rule and captured American attention. This foreign event was of great interest to a nation entrenched in a fierce slavery debate.

The rebellion in India was a violent uprising of an oppressed, servile, non-white class against their white rulers: an ominous sign for Southern states built on racial hierarchy. It became of such great interest to Americans that the *Princeton Review* stated: 'The year of 1857 will be henceforth known as the year of the Sepoy Revolt ... No event of the year in any part of the world has been of deeper interest' – putting it above events such as Bleeding Kansas and the *Dred Scott* decision. The Indian Rebellion of 1857, seen through an American domestic lens, inevitably had strong echoes in the fight over abolition.

For years the two sides of the slave debate drew on the British Empire to make their arguments. British abolition, achieved decades earlier, had long been used as a moral paradigm by prominent American abolitionists, such as Frederick Douglass, William Garrison and Charles Remond. Douglass went as far as to say that 'if we wish to call attention

to *anything* we may point at Britain' to get the American people 'heartily enlisted in the cause'. Anti-abolitionists countered by undermining British morality: South Carolina senator John Calhoun portrayed British imperialism as a greater evil than Southern slavery, calling British India 'one magnificent plantation, peopled by more than a million slaves' and 'far more unlimited and despotic than that of any Southern planter over his slaves'. James Williams and Henry Hotze, eventual Confederate propagandists, declared British abolition 'pseudo-philanthropy'. These views became popular in the South: the Southern author Henry James Field argued, in his popular book *Abolitionism Unveiled*, that abolitionists were employed by the British in a conspiracy to undermine the South and their cotton-based economy. Field's claim may not have seemed unreasonable to many Southerners: Remond, at one point, turned to British abolitionists to see if they would 'promote cotton cultivation in India, to lessen the profits of the American South' and toured the British Isles with Garrison, after which Garrison's abolitionist newspaper began regularly to report on the British Empire. Douglass also publicly considered the work of the British abolitionist George Thompson – who openly stated he hoped cotton cultivation in India would disincentivise American slavery – to be an example for American abolitionists. With these anti-abolitionist arguments, combined with the fact that



Foreign events: the death of Captain Alexander Skene and his wife, Margaret Skene, at Jhansi, during the Sepoy Revolt, English coloured engraving, 19th century.

‘British abolition, achieved decades earlier, had long been used as a moral paradigm’

much of the Northern economy (including many Irish-American jobs) relied on Southern cotton, labelling abolitionists as hypocrites and foreign agents became a successful strategy for keeping the abolitionist movement out of the South, furthering the national divide and reaffirming an anti-abolition coalition.

The portrayal of abolitionists as pro-British and anti-abolitionists as anti-imperialists coincided with heightened Irish nationalism in Northern states. Irish revolutionaries were successful in raising funds and militias in the North. Strong in their nationalism and anti-British imperialism and anxious over the economic impact of abolition, many Irish-Americans felt allied to the Southern cause; as a voting bloc they had buoyed anti-abolitionist candidates to political power in Republican

strongholds. Many Irish-American newspapers even became effectively pro-South in the 1850s and 1860s. Several Irish publications and their publishers were suspended and jailed by the federal government after the suspension of habeas corpus. James J. Faran, editor of the influential Cincinnati *Enquirer*, where race riots occurred, was a critic of the war; James A. McMaster of the *New York Freeman's Journal* was incarcerated and the paper was suppressed; and Belfast-born John Mullaly, editor of the *Metropolitan Record*, New York City's official Catholic newspaper, urged his Irish-American readers to pursue armed resistance to the draft. The New York Draft Riots occurred later that summer. Irish-American anti-imperialism and anti-abolitionism was exacerbated by a perception of abolitionists

that was shared and espoused by pro-slavery advocates.

In the South, the Indian Rebellion of 1857 became the rationale for fearing, discrediting and further opposing abolitionist efforts and Northern power. State Senator John Townsend of South Carolina, one of the earliest secessionists and author of the influential pamphlet *Doom of Slavery in the Union ... It's Safety Out of It*, claimed the rebellion proved that two races 'cannot live together in the same country on the terms of *equality*' and that in order to protect itself, the South should intensify not only its commitment to slavery, but its brutality. Southerners also read the sensationalised reports from the British press of attacks against white women by non-white rebels. Imagined attacks on the Southern ideal of 'innocent white womanhood' by non-white men are a popular theme in white supremacist arguments, evident in the late-1850s by *Jessie Brown*, a play about the Indian Rebellion. Based on reporting that exacerbated the spectre of such attacks by non-white men, portrayed as violent and wanton, the play was successful when it toured the South. Southern diarists Eliza Clitherall and Mary Chestnutt saw it and wondered how long it would be before their slaves rose up as the Indians did, revealing how easily the foreign event fit an anxiety-laden domestic perspective and could be used to promote slavery in the South.

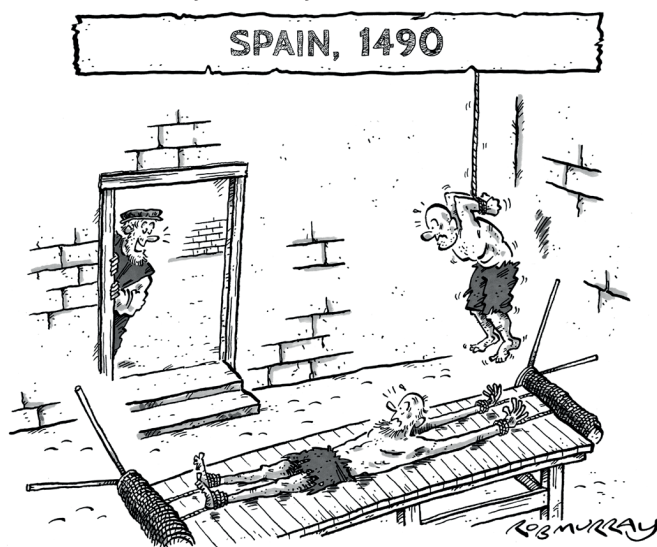
These arguments show how British India was leveraged by anti-abolitionists before and

'The Indian Rebellion became the rationale for fearing, discrediting and opposing abolitionist efforts'

after the rebellion: before 1857, British India was 'one magnificent plantation' of imperialism; after, it was a product of abolition and an ominous augury of increasing Northern power. To Southern audiences, these arguments first held them firm in a moral commitment to slavery, then capitalised on their anxiety over a reversal in the imposition of race-based violence, which was exemplified in India. To Irish-American audiences, they exemplified a historic mistrust of Britain and validated their suspicion of abolitionists. This coalition would maintain solidarity against racial equality through the Civil War and beyond, opposing abolition and civil rights through warfare, draft riots and segregation to the political machinery of Tammany Hall and Jim Crow.

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Alternative Histories by Rob Murray



'Just to let you know, your torturer's been furloughed'

8 JUNE 793 VIKINGS ATTACK LINDISFARNE

The northern diaspora we call the age of the Vikings is testament to the mobility of early medieval Europe. So, too, is the fact that the best contemporary account we have of the Viking raid on Lindisfarne, off the Northumbrian coast, on 8 June 793 comes from the court of Charlemagne in distant Aachen.

Alcuin, a Northumbrian monk and scholar in the service of Charlemagne, wrote several letters and a verse lament on the subject. Shock courses through all of them. ‘The distress of your suffering fills me daily with deep grief’, he wrote to Higbald, the Bishop of Lindisfarne. ‘Heathens desecrated God’s sanctuaries and ... trampled the bodies of saints in God’s temple like



Unholy act: the assault on Lindisfarne, 19th-century engraving.

animal dung in the street.’

Looking back, Alcuin remembered portents in the weather: bloody rain over the minster in York during Lent; sheets of light rushing through the air; whirlwinds and fiery dragons in the firmament. Then there were the words of the biblical prophet, Jeremiah: ‘Out of the north an evil shall break forth.’

Yet it seems clear that the Vikings took the monks by surprise. No one thought, Alcuin said, such an attack could be made from the sea. The raiders dug up the altar and stole the church’s treasures, a later source tells us. They killed some of the monks and stripped others naked. Many were drowned in the sea. Some, including children, they took back to their boats in chains, perhaps to ransom, perhaps to sell into slavery.

It wasn’t simply the violence that shocked. It was also the choice of target. Founded around 635 by the Irish monk Áedán from the community on Iona, Lindisfarne was at the heart of the north’s Christian regeneration. The house’s reputation for austerity and devotion was embodied by one of Áedán’s successors, Cuthbert, perhaps the most beloved of Anglo-Saxon saints. After the raid, the Lindisfarne monks took St Cuthbert’s body on a 200-year-long peregrination around the north before finding a home at Durham. His shrine remained a major site of pilgrimage until Henry VIII’s men destroyed it; like the Vikings before them, they could see only the worth of its gold.

By Mathew Lyons

3 June 1937

Wallis Simpson marries the Duke of Windsor, formerly Edward VIII.

4 June 1783

The Montgolfier brothers make the first public demonstration of flight of a hot-air balloon.



8 June 1913

Death of the suffragette Emily Davison after she throws herself under the king's horse during the Epsom Derby.

10 June 1190

Death of Holy Roman Emperor Frederick I, 'Barbarossa'.



22 June 1633

Galileo recants his Copernicanism.

23 June 1991

First Sonic the Hedgehog video game is released.



Transcendent: McDaniel receives her Oscar from actor Fay Bainter, 1940.

10 JUNE 1893 BIRTH OF A TRAILBLAZER

Gone with the Wind, the 1939 film adaptation of Margaret Mitchell's novel, which valorises the antebellum South, was always controversial. When producer David O. Selznick announced the production, his decision was widely condemned by Civil Rights organisations.

African American actors who took roles in the film were also criticised; in particular, Hattie McDaniel, who played Mammy, the maid, confidante and factotum to the film's central character, Scarlett O'Hara, and her family.

McDaniel, born 10 June 1893, wasn't a shoo-in for the part. But her father was both

a former slave and a Civil War veteran and after Selznick saw her screen test he cancelled all other auditions.

McDaniel unquestionably transcends the role. It was, she said: 'An opportunity to glorify Negro womanhood ... The brave efficient type of womanhood which ... has built our race, paid for our elaborate houses of worship, and sustained our business, charitable and improvement organisations.'

Whether it is possible for that role to transcend the society it inhabits is a more difficult question to answer. Nevertheless, the quality of her performance was immediately evident, even on set, and it won her the first acting Oscar awarded to an African American. It would be 50 years until a black woman won another.

HOW
GREAT
WAS

A L F



RED?

In uniting the peoples
of Wessex and Mercia,
the celebrated king left
an ideological legacy
of lasting importance.

Marc Morris

Previous spread:
Alfred the
Great's statue in
Wantage, by Count
Gleichen, 1877.
Below: England at
the time of Alfred.
Right: the Alfred
Jewel, 871-99.
The inscription
around its edge
translates as
'Alfred ordered me
to be made'.

The best way to get people excited about a nation's founding father is, of course, to make him the subject of a musical.

In August 1740 Frederick, Prince of Wales, son and heir apparent of George II, staged a specially written masque at Cliveden, his country seat in Buckinghamshire. Titled simply *Alfred*, it was a celebration of the career of Alfred the Great, the ninth-century king of Wessex, famous for battling the Vikings and burning the cakes. It is now almost entirely forgotten, apart from a catchy closing number in praise of its hero's naval prowess, known as *Rule, Britannia!*

Enthusiasm for the long-dead Saxon king had been growing steadily since the start of the 18th century. The publication in English of John Spelman's biography, *Alfred the Great*, popularised his now familiar, but until that point seldom used, sobriquet. In the second half of the century, in the wake of expanded performances of the musical on the London stage,

enthusiasm developed into full-blown mania. In 1763 a new inn, the Alfred's Head, was opened in Wantage, his birthplace. In 1769 the banker Henry Hoare began building King Alfred's Tower, a soaring folly, 161 feet high, which still stands near Stourton in Somerset. Around the same time, work commenced on King Alfred's Castle, a cod-medieval creation on a hill to the north of Leeds, commissioned by Jeremiah Dixon, a former high sheriff of Yorkshire, which was demolished in 1946. Alfred became the subject of plays, paintings, novels, songs and poems. Even the America of Alexander Hamilton, embarking on its war of independence from Britain, was unable to resist his appeal. The first ship in the fledgling US Navy, a repurposed merchantman originally named the *Black Prince*, was relaunched as the USS *Alfred*.

Historical foundations

Although this 18th-century fandom was fuelled by present concerns about ruling the waves, it was not without historical foundation. Alfred's nickname 'the Great' is attested as early as the 13th century and a collection of proverbs attributed to the king, dating from the mid-12th century, referred to him as 'England's darling'. It was also at that time that we find the earliest expression of the idea that Alfred was the founding father of his nation, with the chronicler Orderic Vitalis describing him as 'the first king to hold sway over all of England'.

This last claim was demonstrably false. Alfred had started out as ruler of the southern kingdom of Wessex and extended his authority by annexing the western half of the midland kingdom of Mercia. But everything above and beyond the Roman road known as Watling Street – eastern Mercia, East Anglia and Northumbria – remained under the control of the Vikings, who had







Alfred the Great (right) and Guthrum making peace, 19th-century English engraving.

settled those areas during the course of his reign. Orderic had probably taken his cue from the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, a source composed at Alfred's court, which asserted that the king had ruled 'the whole English people'. But he had missed the *Chronicle's* crucial caveat, 'except for the part that was under Danish rule'.

In recent times, the number of caveats about Alfred's career has multiplied. Historians have argued that the king's fortifications – *burhs* – were neither as original nor as regular as once believed. The cobbled streets of Winchester, hitherto

attributed by archaeologists to Alfred, are now considered more likely to have been the work of his predecessors. Literary scholars have cast doubt on the king's intellectual abilities, questioning the claim that he personally translated works of Latin into Old English. Much of the traditional praise for Alfred is based on a contemporary biography of the king, composed by one of his courtiers, Bishop Asser. Had this flattering and partisan portrait not survived, would posterity still have judged him to be 'great'?

Alfred's initial prospects for

greatness were not strong. Born around 848, he was the fifth and youngest son of Æthelwulf, king of the West Saxons. His father seems to have feared that the boy might one day be forced into a monastic habit by his older brothers. A few years later, when Alfred was no more than five, he was sent to Rome, seemingly so that the pope could certify his worthiness for the throne. As it turned out, such precautions were unnecessary. Æthelwulf's first-born son predeceased him and, after the king's death in 858, his second and third sons soon followed him to the grave. When the fourth son died in the spring of 871, Alfred immediately assumed his place.

Bad timing

It was a terrible time to become king of Wessex. At the start of the ninth century the power of the West Saxons had waxed strong. Alfred's grandfather, Egbert, had thrown off the domination of his northern neighbour, Mercia, and seized control of the lands to his east: the former kingdoms of Sussex, Kent and Essex. But these decades of rapid expansion had also witnessed the emergence of a new threat: the Vikings. At first a nuisance, raiding undefended coastal communities in small fleets, by the mid-ninth

century the Vikings had become an existential threat, invading Britain and Francia with large armies. In the late 860s a massive force, described in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* as a 'great heathen army', had occupied East Anglia and Northumbria, in both cases killing their kings. A similar attempt to conquer Mercia was repulsed, but in 870 the Viking host had turned its attention to Wessex and worn down the West Saxons in battle after battle. When Alfred succeeded the following year, morale among his people was at a low ebb.

If Alfred's reign started badly, it soon got worse. Within a few weeks of his accession, the new king was defeated in battle and obliged, in the words of the *Chronicle*, to 'make peace'; a euphemistic way of describing the payment of tribute. This bought the West Saxons a few years of respite, but in 875 their tormentors returned, occupying Wareham and Exeter before Alfred again negotiated their withdrawal. Finally, at the start of 878, the Vikings launched a surprise invasion, taking over the whole kingdom and forcing the king to flee into the fens of Somerset. According to later legend, he was reduced at one point to holing up in the hovel of a swineherd and was sharply rebuked by the wife of his host for neglecting to notice that the loaves (which later became cakes) she had placed in the oven were burning.

From these military and culinary catastrophes, however, Alfred swiftly recovered. In the spring of 878 he rallied the men of Wessex to his banner and rode out against the Vikings, defeating them in battle at Edington in Wiltshire, and then besieging the survivors in their camp until at length they surrendered. So comprehensive was the king's triumph that he was able to dictate terms, not only obliging his enemies to depart from his kingdom, but also

'Scolded Alfred',
19th-century
English engraving.



requiring their leaders be baptised, drawing them into the community of Christian rulers in the hope of inducing them to abide by its rules.

He was also able to increase the scope of his authority. Three years into Alfred's reign, Mercia had fallen to the great heathen army, suffering the same fate as East Anglia and Northumbria. Its king, Burghred, had been chased into exile and replaced by a Viking-approved ruler, Ceolwulf, dismissed in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* as 'a foolish king's thegn'. Shortly before their invasion of Wessex, the Vikings had partitioned Mercia, giving its western half to their client king but keeping the rest for themselves.

In the wake of his victory at Edington, Alfred replaced Ceolwulf as ruler of western Mercia. In an undated treaty, the text of which has survived, the West-Saxon king and his Viking rival, Guthrum, agreed to split the conquered kingdom along the line of Watling Street, except for a bulge of territory to the north and east of London, which was accorded to Alfred. Precisely how this takeover was achieved is unclear, but it seems unlikely that Ceolwulf had much say in the matter: he vanishes from the record at this point.

A carve up

While most people in western Mercia must have been pleased to be rid of the Vikings, they were not thrilled about being ruled by the king of Wessex. Relations between the two kingdoms, once fierce rivals, had improved in recent decades as the Viking menace had grown. In 853 Burghred had married Alfred's older sister, Æthelswith, and in 867 Alfred himself had married a Mercian noblewoman, Ealhswith. In that year the West Saxons had also helped to expel the great heathen army from Mercia. But collaboration was one thing, annexation quite another. Alfred's takeover of a huge swathe of

Mercian territory in the wake of his deal with Guthrum meant the carve up of a proud ancient kingdom and a loss of independence for its people.

It is a measure of Alfred's astuteness as a ruler that he worked hard to assuage these resentments and win over his new Mercian subjects. In the first place, he did not seek to rule his new territory directly. By 883 at the latest, western Mercia was being governed by a man called Æthelred. Although he could not style himself 'king' and had to settle for the lesser title of 'ealdorman', Æthelred was otherwise treated more like a junior partner than a subordinate. In his charters the ealdorman adopted a quasi-regal style ('Æthelred, by the gift of divine grace raised to the rule and lordship of the Mercians') and before 886 had been married to Alfred's daughter, Æthelflæd.

Also striking are the king's efforts to woo the leaders of the Mercian church. Alfred, in the latter part of his reign, sponsored an educational and literary revival, recruiting scholars to his court to help him translate Latin texts into English, in the hope of arresting the decline in standards caused by decades of Danish destruction. But, as he explained in a letter, the lack of scholars in Wessex forced him to look north of the Thames for talent. The leading lights of the Alfredian renaissance were Bishop Werferth of Worcester, Plegmund (later Archbishop of Canterbury) and two priests, Æthelstan and Werwulf. 'Alfred summoned these four men to him from Mercia,' says Asser, 'and showered them with many honours and entitlements in the kingdom of Wessex.'

Raising standards of literacy may have been the primary task of these men, but it also fell to them to improve the cohesion of Alfred's enlarged realm. A century and a half earlier, the Venerable Bede had



Further reading

- Richard Abels, *Alfred the Great: War, Kingship and Culture in Anglo-Saxon England* (Routledge, 1998)
- Simon Keynes, 'The Cult of King Alfred the Great', *Anglo-Saxon England*, 28 (1999)
- Sarah Foot, 'The Making of Angelcynn: English Identity Before the Norman Conquest', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society, Sixth Series*, 6 (1996)

explained to his readers how post-Roman Britain had been settled by 'three very powerful Germanic tribes – the Saxons, the Angles and the Jutes'. The Saxons, said Bede, had created the kingdoms of Wessex, Sussex and Essex, while the Angles had based themselves in East Anglia, Mercia and Northumbria. In reality, it was a great deal more complicated than this: Bede, in a much less famous passage, acknowledged that 'there were very many peoples in Germany from whom the Angles and Saxons, who now live in Britain, derive their origins', while other written evidence suggests the people in these kingdoms rarely observed these distinctions. We find seventh-century Northumbrians described as Saxons and eighth-century people from Wessex referring to themselves as Angles. Nevertheless, by Alfred's time, partly thanks to the popularity of Bede's history, the belief in a primordial divide between Angles and Saxons had hardened.

Common history

It was this divide that Alfred sought to bridge. From the moment he annexed western Mercia, the king adopted a new royal title. Asser starts calling him 'King of the Anglo-Saxons' (*Angulsaxonum rex*) after 882 and the scribes composing royal charters often did so, too. It was not the first time that the compound 'Anglo-Saxon' had been used. A few eighth-century authors had used a similar formulation, but as a means of distinguishing 'the English Saxons' from the Saxons on the Continent. The literati at Alfred's court were clearly not using it in this way. In a couple of his charters Alfred is styled 'king of the Angles and Saxons' (*rex Anglorum et Saxonum*), suggesting this was the way that the shorter compound title was intended to be read. Alfred wished to be seen as a king of both peoples.

This royal style survived Alfred for

several decades. His son, Edward the Elder, used it until his death in 924 and it was used occasionally by kings who ruled thereafter (Edward the Confessor is styled *Angul-Saxonum rex* in a charter of 1061). But as time wore on it became more common for talk of Saxons to be dropped. Alfred's grandson, Æthelstan, was styled 'king of the English' (*rex Anglorum*) after his conquest of Northumbria in 927 and this was henceforth the most common title used by his secretariat. This shift may not have pleased everyone. A contemporary poem in praise of the same conquest persisted in calling Æthelstan 'king of the Saxons', referred to his soldiers as 'the army of the Saxons' and enthused about 'this Saxon-land made whole' (*ista Saxonia perfecta*). But 'Saxon-land' never caught on. 'Engla-land', in use by the end of the tenth century, was the future.

This development was in large part down to Alfred. Although he is styled 'king of the Anglo-Saxons' in Latin documents (his charters and Asser's biography), the vernacular works produced at his court refer to the people under his rule as 'Angelcynn'. This word was not an entirely novel coinage: it occurs once before, in a Mercian charter of 855. Nor was it a new concept to insist that all the Anglo-Saxon peoples were in some sense 'English': Bede had sometimes used the Latin phrase *gens Anglorum* in the same all-embracing sense. When Alfred's team of scholars translated Bede's *Ecclesiastical History* into English, *gens Anglorum* was rendered as 'Angelcynn'. The king and his advisers took an existing term and pushed it for political purposes: to convince his subjects in both Mercia and Wessex, Angles and Saxons, of their fundamental unity. *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, although not accorded that title until later, served the same end, interweaving the annals of all the early kingdoms

Alfred's galleys attacking Viking ships, from *Hutchinson's Story of the British Nation*, 1922-24.



to create a common history.

The practical measures Alfred took as king should not be overlooked or underplayed. Many of his burhs may have been pre-existing fortresses, but it was Alfred who transformed them into an integrated network and arranged for them to be garrisoned at all times. He was not, as later claimed, the founder of the Royal Navy, but he did sail out against the Vikings and increased the size of his fleet with ships of his own design. He won no famous victories after his do-or-die gamble at Edington, but he resisted the Danes when they returned in the final decade of his reign, trusting in the new defences he had put in place.

But while these practical measures were important, what elevates Alfred as a leader is his

ideological legacy. A less sagacious ruler might have tried to absorb western Mercia into Wessex and continued as 'king of the West Saxons'. Alfred, by contrast, rebranded himself as 'king of the Anglo-Saxons' in an effort to reach out to his new Anglian subjects and sought to remind them of the things they and the Saxons had in common: their language, their religion and their history. In so doing, he succeeded in convincing them that they had a common future. In that sense, he fully deserves his reputation as a founding father and his later accolade, 'the Great'.

Marc Morris is author of *The Anglo-Saxons: A History of the Beginnings of England* (Hutchinson, 2021).

For wealthy tourists travelling to the Middle East in the 19th century, the services of a dragoman were an essential purchase. Yet the often difficult lives of these local agents and guides remain elusive. *Michael Press*

HERE BE DRAGOMANS



A steamer approaches the shores of Palestine in the middle of the 19th century and the Holy Land comes into view: the port of Jaffa and its houses; the plains beyond; and, in the far distance, the mountains of Judea, with Jerusalem somewhere among them. A mile from land, the ship stops. Jaffa, it turns out, does not have a safe harbour for seagoing vessels as a result of reefs near its shore. And so the chaos begins. A fleet of rowing boats arrives and the men inside pile out onto the ship, with a noise 'quite deafening and bewildering', as the Reverend A.J. Binnie put it in 1881. Those who manage to get onto one of these boats are rowed to shore amid a tossing sea of arms and legs. At the centre of it all is a mysterious figure: the dragoman.

'No sooner had we set foot on shore than we were assailed by a host of touters and porters and dragomans', recalled Thomas Lewin of a trip in 1861. 'Every piece of our baggage was a prize for which three or four men struggled.' But the dragoman could also be a comforting presence among the crowd, 'a happy-faced, gentlemanly man', wrote Binnie, 'whose hand we grasped as the hand of a dear old friend'.

What, exactly, was a dragoman? Originally, he was an interpreter. This is the meaning of the Arabic word *tarjuman*. For hundreds of years they were specialists who worked for foreign diplomats. But in the 19th century, as more and more Europeans – and later Americans – travelled in the Middle East as tourists, dragomans took on a new role. The term began to describe a combination of travel agent, caterer and guide, arranging the tourist's route through an unknown country and providing all necessities along the way.

Lucrative trade

Murray's handbooks for Egypt, the first modern travel guides to the country, give us a good idea of the increasing importance of the dragoman. In the first edition, of 1847, 'dragomans' do not appear. A quarter of a

century later, they were indispensable. In the nine years between the second (1858) and third (1867) editions of the handbook, the recommended wages for hired help in Egypt skyrocketed, but none more than those of the dragoman, whose services doubled in price. 'The fact of a voyage up the Nile having become one so essentially *de luxe* does not arise solely from the increase in price in Egypt of every article of trade and consumption', explained the Egyptologist Gardner Wilkinson, author of the handbooks. The problem was that the trip was no longer limited to the 'artist in search of material for his pen', the 'invalid in search of health', or (most importantly for Wilkinson) the 'archaeologist in his search for knowledge'. Now it was open to 'the rich and idle, to whom money was no object' and so it was 'impossible to persuade the best dragoman to do the thing except in the profuse and lavish way to which they have been accustomed'.

Dragomans were essential for this new kind of luxury travel. For trips up the Nile they would hire a boat (a *dahabiyah*) and a crew and stock it with provisions. For trips through Palestine they would hire a caravan of animals and servants and bring tents. Their responsibilities included feeding travellers and providing all the drinks – or almost all. In some cases it was recommended to bring your own alcohol. Increasingly, dragomans were relied upon to cater to wealthy travellers' every need. The ability of the best dragomans to deliver the goods became legendary. 'Brown has come to believe, at least, that the dragoman has got Aladdin's lamp hidden about his person, and has ceased to be surprised at anything', Mark Twain wrote of a fellow traveller between Beirut and Damascus in one of his satirical letters to the *Daily Alta California*. 'He has gone out now to inquire if the dragoman has brought a piano along.'

So ubiquitous was the dragoman that Frederic Eden could publish a popular book in 1872 called *The Nile without a Dragoman*: an instruction book on how to travel in Egypt

cheaply. Arabic phrasebooks were published with titles like *The Dragoman for Travellers*.

But the early 1870s, the very time when dragomans had become ubiquitous, also saw major changes (and threats) to their profession. Western companies began to take over the lion's share of the tourist trade, led by Thomas Cook and Son. On the Nile, steamers operated by Cook's took business from personal boats hired by dragomans; in Palestine, Cook's ran package tours with similar effect. The situation was dire enough that a group of 18 dragomans banded together, writing to the *The Times* in 1874 about Cook's monopoly. While insisting that they could offer lower rates, independent dragomans were, it appears, undercut by Cook's tours. Rates for dragomans may have shot up over the



Previous spread:
a dragoman in an Egyptian
temple, 1880s.

Above: 'Admiring the view
from the Quaker City',
illustration from Mark
Twain's *The Innocents
Abroad*, 1869.

previous couple of decades, but they were now forced to lower their fees in order to attract business. European tourists, meanwhile, appreciated Cook's cut-rate packages, provided by a recognised and trusted name, leaving them fewer details of the trip to worry about themselves – and fewer interactions with local residents, another benefit in the eyes of some. Companies like Cook's hired many of the best dragomans.

Independence struggles

Not all dragomans lost business, however. Rolla Floyd, who worked for Cook's for several years in the 1870s, struck out on his own in the early 1880s and was successful for a time. But it was not easy for Floyd as an independent dragoman, in a long-standing feud with his former employer. Cook's tried to bribe boatmen in Jaffa harbour not to ferry him to landing ships, wrote it into company contracts with hotels in Jerusalem not to allow him to step foot in the buildings and hired local thugs to threaten him. Floyd, in turn, would rent draft animals just to prevent Cook's from using them and revelled in poaching its customers. The war took its toll, however; making a living as an independent dragoman was a precarious affair. Floyd ended up working during much of his later career for Henry Gaze and Sons, Cook's primary competitor.

With so many options available – Thomas Cook, Henry Gaze, independent dragomans – finding services was rarely difficult for travellers. Guidebooks suggested that it was best to arrange a dragoman in advance, before leaving home. If not, however, you would still have a choice of dragomans; they would seek you out at your hotel, at the port where you landed, on your ship as you docked, or in some cases long before. 'I was besieged in Malta by a surly fellow, who wished to become my dragoman', recalled William Mason Turner of Petersburg, Virginia, in 1861, 'though as yet a thousand miles from Canaan.'

But which dragoman to choose? Sometimes





tourists chose dragomans on the basis of their nationality, of which there was enormous variety. Many, of course, were natives of Egypt and the Levant. They might be Protestant, Catholic, Greek Orthodox, Muslim, Druze or Jewish. ‘The dragoman is of four species’, asserted G.W. Curtis in *Nile Notes of a Howadji* (1851), one of the most popular ‘eastern’ travel narratives of the 19th century: ‘The Maltese, or the able knave; the Greek, or the cunning knave; the Syrian, or the active knave; and the Egyptian, or the stupid knave.’ Today such stereotypes are cringeworthy, but in the 19th century, they were thought worthy of being quoted in Murray’s guidebook.

The personal and professional backgrounds of dragomans were just as much of a kaleidoscope: Rolla Floyd was part of the failed

American Colony in Jaffa that settled there for a while in the mid-1860s and was one of the few who remained in Palestine; Solomon Negima started as a soldier in the British army in Sudan in the 1880s before going into business as a dragoman; Paolo Sapienza had studied medicine and he and his son Antonio were noted taxidermists.

As a tourist, your dragoman might have been a former teacher, a nurse, a Roman Catholic priest, or a Nubian slave trader. For some, being a dragoman was merely a temporary stepping stone to a better life. Antonio Bishallany looked for that better life in the United States; he is sometimes claimed to have been the first Arab immigrant to the country. Several moved on to running hotels, such as Alexander Howard in Jaffa and Jerusalem, Nicola Bassoul in Beirut,

Left: Far Away Moses at the 1893 World’s Fair in Chicago.

Above: a dahabiyah (Nile passenger boat), c.1870.









Previous spread:
a Thomas Cook tour
party in Luxor, late
19th century.

Above: Sheppard's
Hotel, Cairo, 19th century.

Dimitri (whose last name is uncertain) in Damascus, or Mysseri in Constantinople. For others, being a dragoman was a lifelong career.

Services rendered

To attract clients, dragomans relied on business cards as well as testimonial books. These, one of the most important possessions of the dragoman, were albums in which they would paste the letters of clients praising their services at the end of their tours. The travel accounts published by many middle- and upper-class tourists when they returned home helped to advertise the services of dragomans even further. From them we get a sense of the range of well-off, sometimes famous clients. The Sapienzas worked for a young Theodore Roosevelt and his family, Rolla Floyd for the former US President and Civil War general Ulysses S. Grant.

The attraction of working for such clients was that their wealth and fame might rub off on the dragoman. The case of Far Away Moses is exceptional, but shows what a dragoman might aspire to. Moses worked as a dragoman and guide in Constantinople for many years. He was already well known in 1867 when he guided a group of tourists, including Mark Twain, from the *Quaker City*, the first American cruise ship in the Mediterranean. When Twain's account of the trip, *The Innocents Abroad*, became a bestseller in 1869, Far Away Moses' fame skyrocketed. Moses knew how valuable this was; he would borrow the book from the US Consulate in order to read to potential clients the passage mentioning him. Eventually he wrote to Twain himself to acquire a copy of the chapter he appeared in (Twain asked his publisher to forward it to Constantinople). From then on, Moses was the stuff of legend. Travellers made up various tales about him – that he was named 'Far Away Moses' because he always walked far ahead of his clients, for example. Guides in Constantinople, even on other continents claimed to be his brother. During the 1870s he was so well known that he

became a figurehead for an international business. He set up a number of Far Away Moses shops when living in the US.

But working for wealthy clients could have serious drawbacks, even dangers. Dragomans were widely looked down upon. They were not only from ‘the East’, but they were servants, a very different class from the generally affluent tourists who hired them. The tourist trade in the Middle East boomed at a time when the European powers had increasingly imperial designs on Egypt and the Levant; it is part of what made this brisk tourist trade possible. In 1882 Britain formalised some of these designs by occupying Egypt. European power is also reflected in the ease with which British companies, especially Thomas Cook, could dominate the tourist industry. Independent dragomans, forced to compete with companies on a scale that threatened their livelihoods, were at the mercy of westerners in many ways.

Fabled dragons

These extreme imbalances of power are reflected in the portrayals of dragomans in travel literature. Writers regularly depict dragomans as cruel and violent. ‘We just call them dragons – it’s shorter’, one tourist is quoted as saying. Another writer imagines dragomans as cannibals eating their victims alive ‘at watering-holes and hotels ... as it was the fabled dragons of old did’. Tourists often included accounts of dragoman violence in their travel accounts. They are depicted beating other servants, as well as any local residents who got in their way. Tourists would claim to be shocked by this behaviour, at least at first, but soon got used to it. ‘It is quite melancholy to see how the people all along the river submit to the whip without offering any resistance’, lamented one observer. Another commented that ‘this discipline of the stick, though very ancient, highly necessary, and perfectly well understood in Egypt, revolts at first one’s English prejudices’. The American poet William Cullen Bryant, traveling through Palestine in 1852,



praised the ‘liberality’ of his dragoman to the servants under him in the same sentence that he commented in passing that the dragoman is ‘a little too much given to flogging his Arabs’.

The dragoman is commonly portrayed as a tyrant, not only over other servants but over their clients. Robert Walter Stewart, a minister of the Free Church of Scotland travelling in Egypt and Palestine in the 1850s, warned that, as soon as the contract with the dragoman is signed, the traveller is completely in their power: a ‘state of slavery’, as Stewart described it, in which the dragoman owns you. The minister was far from alone in his concerns. Travellers referred to the dragoman as a ‘despot’, given to ‘ruling over’ his clients. The *Church Weekly*, a London newspaper, published an entire article of such warnings in 1898 entitled ‘The Tyranny of the Dragoman’.

But who was really in control? Tourists had considerable power over their dragomans. They were their servants, after all. Travel handbooks would regularly remind readers of this fact. The most consistent piece of advice for dealing with dragomans was to show them who

A receipt from Shepherd's Hotel, late 19th century.

the real ‘master’ was. Travellers would sometimes beat their dragomans. ‘I had not been on the Nile a week before I learned that the koorbash [whip] was the only weapon of defense necessary to carry’, wrote the then-famous William Cowper Prime in 1857, as he threatened to beat his servants throughout Egypt and Palestine. (Today, Prime is largely forgotten, except for being mocked by Twain for his melodrama.) When Paolo Sapienza took advantage of the naivety and inexperience of Agnes and Margaret Smith (who were decades away from becoming famous as scholars and manuscript collectors), one of their friends in Egypt even suggested whipping their dragoman. Eventually they decided against it, but only because Sapienza was Maltese and therefore a British subject with British protection. Warnings about the tyranny of the dragoman were ultimately not just figurative, but a type of projection in an environment where wealthy westerners exercised power in so many ways. Travellers could hold the dragomans’ lives in their hands.

This gulf between image and reality points to something else: the dragomans we encounter are, to some extent, characters in other people’s narratives. Sometimes they receive only passing mentions, while on other occasions they are central figures: John Ross Browne’s dragoman became the title character of *Yusef, or, The Journey of the Frangi: A Crusade in the East* (1853). But in every case, dragomans appear as literary figures. Almost all we know of dragomans comes from the travel accounts of foreigners. And these tell us almost nothing (or at least almost nothing that is reliable) about their actual lives. Even their identities are often a mystery. Some took on Anglicised names to appeal to their customers. Iskander Awad, for example, became Alexander Howard. One Egyptian dragoman in the first half of the 20th century went primarily by the nickname ‘Spud Murphy’. Twain claims that his group just called their dragoman ‘Ferguson’, as they did with all their other foreign guides. Far Away Moses was

probably the most famous dragoman in the world and yet we lack basic details of his life, including knowledge of his family and even whether ‘Moses’ was his real name.

We so rarely hear dragomans speak in their own words. Even the exceptions are revealing. Demetrius Coufopoulos, based in Constantinople, wrote a popular travel guide to the city that ran to four editions in a little over a decade, but included nothing of himself in the book. Antonio Bishallany was the subject of a biography following his death in 1856, but this served mainly as a lesson in Protestant conversion and missionaries’ opinions on the American Tract Society. We are told that Bishallany left behind manuscripts, but what was included from them as an appendix to the biography are his selections of Bible verses, nothing of his own composition. Testimonial books of dragomans such as Solomon Negima survive, but they too consist of letters written about him by his clients.

This fact makes something like the dragomans’ letter to *The Times* in 1874 so valuable. It also means that we need to look for dragomans representing themselves in less obvious places. Today, if you visit the colossal statues of Ramesses II at Abu Simbel in Egypt, or the nearby temples, or the temple of Amada, or the temple of Soleb farther down the Nile in Sudan, you will see, among the names of travellers inscribed into the stone monuments, those of the dragoman Paolo Sapienza and his family. Agnes Smith described with clear disapproval how they would inscribe their names all over the monuments of ancient Egypt. Some of us might look upon this graffiti, as Smith did, as a travesty, desecrating these ancient temples. But we can also see it as something else, a mark of history: one of the rare opportunities for dragomans to assert their identity and be remembered for posterity, on their own terms.

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Further reading

● Naomi Shepherd, *The Zealous Intruders: The Western Rediscovery of Palestine* (Harper & Row, 1987)

● Rachel Mairs and Maya Muratov, *Archaeologists, Tourists, Interpreters: Exploring Egypt and the Near East in the Late 19th-Early 20th Centuries* (Bloomsbury, 2015)

THE END OF A NATION





Wedge between
Russia, Prussia
and Austria, the
Polish-Lithuanian
Commonwealth
faced extinction in
the 18th century.
Richard Butterwick



Previous spread,
left: Catherine II,
by Fyodor Stepanovich
Rokotov, c.1770.

Previous spread, right:
Stanisław August
Poniatowski, by Johann
Baptist Lampi the Elder,
18th century.



Above a small town on the right bank of the Dnieper, once Kaniów in south-eastern Poland, now Kaniv in central Ukraine, is a hill, the Moskiewka (Little Moscow). At about 9pm on 6 May 1787 it erupted. Among those who witnessed the spectacle was a young man, Omelek Derevianka. He recalled that 'the moon and the stars, flaming sheaves, columns or crosses shone above the town'. His memories were of a simulated eruption of Vesuvius. Thousands of rockets roared into the sky, while fires lit in ditches suggested the flow of lava down to the river. Illuminated on the summit was a tall obelisk with the cipher of the Empress of Russia, Catherine II, 'the Great'. It was in her honour that this entertainment had been laid on by the king of Poland. Stanisław August Poniatowski had crossed his realm in order to meet her as she sailed south to tour Russia's latest annexation: the Crimea. She may have watched the display from her galley, moored in the middle of the river, which divided her empire from the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. Perhaps she had already muffled her ears and gone to bed. The king's launch had not yet reached the shore when the pyrotechnics began. Within eight years, his Commonwealth would be blown sky high.

The empress was 58, the king 55. So much had changed during the 29 years since they had parted as lovers. She was then the wife of the heir to the Russian imperial throne. Poniatowski had been introduced to her by the British ambassador to Russia, Sir Charles Hanbury Williams, who had taken him under his wing and brought him to St Petersburg as his secretary. Poniatowski was a promising young man, whose talents were 'capable of catching light and flame'. Williams became an equally avuncular counsellor to Catherine, who was trapped in an unhappy marriage at a perilous court. Several years later she applied his advice. Having seized the throne from her husband Peter III in 1762, she resolved to make

*Fireworks at Kaniów,
by Jan Bogumil
Plersch, 1787.*



Poniatowski king of Poland and score an early diplomatic success abroad.

With the death on 5 October 1763 of Augustus III, elective King of Poland and Grand Duke of Lithuania, the throne of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth became vacant. The election would be contested between the partisans of the House of Saxony and the aristocratic faction headed by Poniatowski's maternal uncles, the Princes Czartoryski. The intervention of the Russian army tipped the scales in favour of the latter. In ceremonies held on 6 and 7 September 1764, just over 5,500 noblemen turned up at a field outside Warsaw to choose Poniatowski as their king. He was crowned on 25 November, the feast of St Catherine of Alexandria.

Pliant instrument?

Trouble had already begun, rooted in mutual misperception. It was not so much that Poniatowski would have preferred to marry Catherine rather than become king of Poland;

on that score she soon disabused him and he got over it. It was rather that she believed him to be a pliant instrument of her will, which was to subordinate Poland-Lithuania to Russian imperial interests. For his part, he believed she could share his vision of an enlightened and reformed Commonwealth, which would be the junior political partner of an enlightened and reformed Russian Empire. Yet her default position was to continue the policy pursued by Peter the Great: to tighten control over her neighbour through politicians tied to the Russian embassy. As she played the game of international politics for high stakes, she would pay diplomatic bills to Prussia or Austria with Polish territory, while helping herself to the strategically important and fertile lands coveted by her courtiers and generals.

Poniatowski's reformist ambitions offended many of his nobles as much as they irritated the empress. That mattered, as the Commonwealth's elective monarchs were hamstrung by an oath limiting their prerogative and by the array of freedoms, rights and privileges of the numerous nobles, the *szlachta*. The reign of Augustus III (1734-63) had brought some cultural and intellectual change, as well as an economic and demographic recovery from decades of wars, rebellions, plagues and famines that had left the country devastated and defenceless during the first third of the 18th century. The schools run by the Catholic Theatine, Piarist and Jesuit orders updated their curricula, selectively embracing new ideas and discoveries as they sought to form enlightened and critical, though firmly Catholic, patriots. Yet the better the Commonwealth's finest minds diagnosed its maladies and proposed remedies, the more mired its politics became in corruption and chaos. The slogans of republican liberty and ancestral virtue had become disconnected from the grubby manoeuvring between aristocratic cliques and their clients for the fruits of royal patronage.

The biennial parliament – the *sejm* – was

Above: Charles Hanbury Williams, by John Giles Eccardt, c.1746.



paralysed by the notorious *liberum veto*. During the 17th century the principle of proceeding by consensus had, by a series of precedents, hardened into the right of a single parliamentarian not only to refuse the necessary consent to particular measures, but even to curtail the sejm itself. Because all legislation needed to be read out again at the end of the sejm and approved three times at a joint sitting of both houses – the Senate and the Chamber of Elected Envoys – the exercise of this right ensured the loss of everything agreed hitherto. There would usually be more than one domestic magnate or foreign power whose interests would be threatened by the successful conclusion of a sejm: during the reign of Augustus III, only one sejm passed any laws at all. The local assemblies of the nobility – the *sejmiki* – were also subject to the rule of unanimity. They elected judges to local and national courts, though a frequent failure to do so meant that the Commonwealth's judicial arteries began to seize up.

The way around the impasse was to form a confederacy: something between an armed league of noble citizens and a state of emergency. Although sometimes formed against monarchs who threatened nobles' liberty, confederacies could also be established 'around the king'. They were traditionally formed from the bottom up: local confederacies would join general confederacies, first separately for the Crown of the Kingdom of Poland and the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, and finally into a conjoined confederacy of the 'Two Nations' (which had formed the Commonwealth in 1569). They could, however, also be formed from the top down, with local confederacies established later. The general council of a confederacy could, when necessary, decide by majority vote. A sejm held under the auspices of a confederacy therefore met as one chamber and was not subject to the *liberum veto*. However, whenever the possibility was aired of an extraordinary, confederated sejm, which

could increase taxes, expand the meagre armed forces and unclog the courts, a discreet warning from St Petersburg sufficed to dissuade Augustus III from pursuing the idea.

The ideal time for reform was an interregnum, for at this perilous moment the *sejmy*, which convoked and oversaw the election, took place under the aegis of a general confederacy. This occurred in 1763-64: with Catherine focused on winning a diplomatic victory over her Ottoman, Austrian and French rivals by having her own candidate elected, the Czartoryskis were able to introduce overdue reforms to the treasury, military and judiciary and then continue the confederacy until the sejm of 1766. The young king regarded these measures as the start of a glorious 'new creation of the Polish world', but his imperial benefactress reined him in sharply. The consequences proved incendiary.

Russian demands

The empress demanded the restoration of political equality for non-Catholic noble citizens. During the interregnum of 1572-73, at the high tide of the Protestant Reformation in Poland-Lithuania, the Commonwealth had prevented civil war by an agreement among its citizens, equal in law but divided by religion, to refrain from mutual persecution. During the 17th century this equality of status changed into a reluctant and restrictive toleration of Protestants and Orthodox by the dominant Catholics. The first two thirds of the 18th century saw the final exclusion of these 'dissidents' from the political process, as well as their harassment by Catholic bishops, with scant hope of legal redress. The 'dissidents' sought protection from Lutheran Prussia and Orthodox Russia. Although their position was no worse than that of most other religious minorities in Europe, by the 1760s the wider intellectual climate was flowing strongly for enlightened 'tolerance'. Voltaire and other *philosophes* applauded Catherine's interference. Poniatowski pleaded that

his 'nation' (the nobles) would never accept the dissidents' participation in the legislature, arguing that religious unity was more important to a commonwealth than to an absolute monarchy. The empress was unconvinced.

Catherine defended her Orthodox co-religionists in the Commonwealth. The Uniate Church (the Ruthenian or Slavonic Rite of the Catholic Church established by the 1596 Union of Brest) had been expanding towards the Russian frontier at the expense of Orthodoxy. This advance had only recently been halted by Orthodox hierarchs. By supporting their cause, the German-born, Lutheran-raised empress could appeal to Russian Orthodox sentiment in order to tighten her grip on the freshly usurped throne. By this time, peasants comprised the majority of the Orthodox flock in the Commonwealth; there were few Orthodox burghers and nobles left in Poland-Lithuania. The latter, most of them impoverished and illiterate denizens of the Pripet marshes, were of less use to Russian ambassadors than the several hundred remaining Protestant noble families. Following the rejection by the sejm of 1766 of the renewed Russian demands, Ambassador Nikolai Repnin organised confederacies of dissident citizens who demanded the restoration of their rights, as well as assemblies of Catholic nobles who hoped to dethrone the king.

To break the resistance of the confederated sejm, which met in the autumn of 1767, Repnin had three recalcitrant senators arrested and then incarcerated in the Russian Empire. It worked: the sejm agreed to all the Russian demands, which extended beyond religious matters to the formal guarantee by Russia of the freshly formulated 'cardinal laws', including 'free' royal elections and the liberum veto, which underpinned the Polish-Lithuanian form of government. Poniatowski, though humiliated, kept his crown.

Even before 'Repnin's sejm' concluded in the spring of 1768 another confederacy formed at

**'The Polish Plumb-Cake',
18th-century English
engraving.**

The Polish Plumb-Cake.



J. Lodge sculp

*Thy Kingdom Stanislaus, is now at stake.
To four such stomachs, 'tis a mere plumb-cake.*



Bar in the south-east of Poland. Created in defence of the faith and freedom of the *szlachta*, it was directed against the king and his reforms, the 'heretics' and 'schismatics', and the Russian violations of the Commonwealth's sovereignty. In the far south-eastern provinces, the insurgency clashed with a revolt of Cossacks and peasants against nobles, Jews and the Catholic clergy, fired by belief in the empress' support. Slaughter was followed by bloody repression.

It took four years to quench the confederates' fire. Initial Russian efforts to extinguish the blaze sparked a declaration of war by the Ottoman Empire, irked by the Russian presence in Poland-Lithuania. The war against the Turks took priority and the Commonwealth was plunged into chaos. Suppressed in one region, the insurgency erupted elsewhere. The king and his uncles proved less than cooperative, which made Catherine open to the idea of resolving the situation through the partition of Poland hinted at by Frederick II of Prussia. Following her victories over Ottoman forces, she could dictate the terms. Maria Theresa, ruler of Austria, wept at the iniquity of the carve-up, but had no choice but to join in.

Territorial loss

In 1772 the Commonwealth was shorn of about a third of its territory and population. The economic dislocation was profound. The indefensible new frontiers were more unlike those of the current Republic of Poland than any before or since. Not only was another confederated sejm, which sat from 1773 to 1775, obliged to ratify the treaties of partition, it also accepted a form of government designed to preserve Russian hegemony and emasculate the monarch further. The only consolation was the Commission of National Education, which managed during the next two decades to overhaul secondary and tertiary education in the spirit of patriotism and a moderate Catholic Enlightenment.

Left: the Great Sejm, 1789, 19th-century German engraving.

Above right: Nikolai Repnin, engraving, 1815.



In an unlikely development, Poniatowski convinced the Russian Ambassador, Otto Magnus von Stackelberg, who in turn persuaded Catherine, that political stability required a strengthening both of his own prerogatives and of the new Permanent Council. These changes were forced through by another confederated sejm in 1776, along with the abolition of judicial torture and trials for witchcraft. It proved a brief high watermark for the king. Catherine rejected his proposals for an alliance, which would have given the Commonwealth greater security, and for confederated sejms. At her insistence, the sejms held between 1778 and 1786 were all 'free'; their deliberations subject to unanimity. The worst setback of these years was the rejection by the sejm of 1780 of the codification of the laws rapidly completed in an enlightened spirit by a commission appointed in 1776. If implemented, it would have undermined serfdom; that, for the moment, was out of the question. Even Rousseau, in his *Considerations on the Government of Poland*, penned for the confederates of Bar in 1771, warned

that freedom was ‘not for every stomach’.

During this politically fallow decade, Russia maintained a stalemate between the king and his supporters on the one hand and a coalition of disgruntled magnates on the other. In 1781 the leading figure in the aristocratic coalition, Franciszek Ksawery Branicki, married Aleksandra, the favourite niece of Grigorii Potemkin, who had become Catherine’s morganatic husband. The opposition lobbied for a new ambassador who would work through the ‘first families’, so although Stackelberg behaved like a Roman proconsul, Poniatowski preferred the devil he knew. The powerlessness of the truncated Commonwealth was brought home by repeated violations of the new frontiers by detachments of Russian, Prussian and Austrian troops.

Mixed results

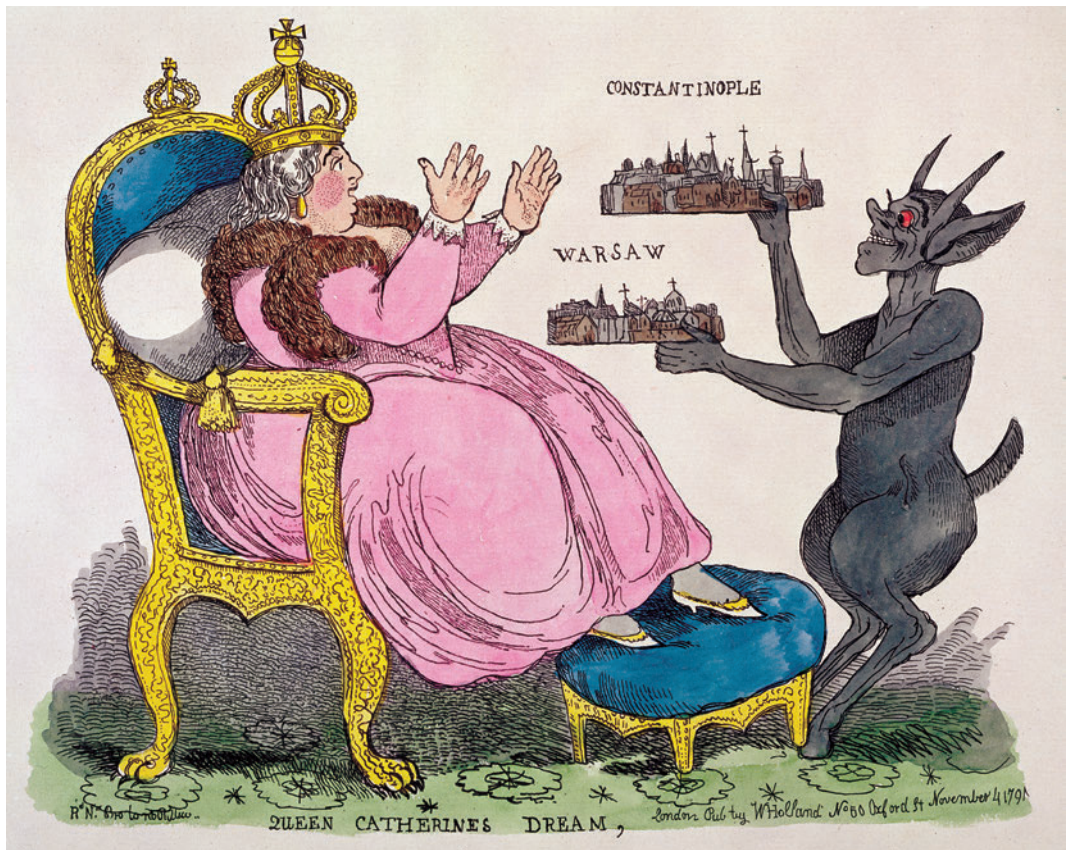
In these unpromising circumstances, the monarch pursued incremental changes via the Permanent Council, his cabinet and military chancellery and the cooperation of Catholic bishops. The latter were led by his brother Michał, a reluctant priest, but an able ecclesiastical reformer. The king and his supporters sought with mixed results to improve the governance of the regions, deal with vagrancy, plug loopholes in revenue, exploit mineral resources, stimulate investment in canals and roads, remove obstacles to trade and modernise the diminutive armed forces. A career as a customs and excise officer became an attractive option for poor but educated noblemen. Similarly, the Commonwealth’s modest diplomatic service set up missions in St Petersburg, Vienna, Berlin, London and Rome.

The king also established a royalist party, deftly managing the channels of patronage that remained to him after 1775. Court artists, preachers and intellectuals propagated a vision of a prosperous and orderly Poland. Respectable citizens’ liberty and property, vulnerable to the licence of anarchic magnates

and their retinues, would be assured by prompt and impartial justice and the harmonious cooperation of king and nation. This vision was strongly influenced by the limited parliamentary monarchy Poniatowski had observed in Great Britain as a young man and by his reading of Montesquieu. A favoured group of political theorists, several of them Piarist priests, began to write about liberty in new ways. The traditional republican discourse of freedom was akin to a shield, hewn from the nobles’ patriotic virtue, opposed to monarchical attempts to chip away at their privileges and liberties. This was now challenged by a universal idea of natural rights and human dignity, applied to all individuals.

The monarch found himself battling a headwind of nostalgia, opposed to the economic, social, cultural and intellectual changes he had encouraged. Medium-sized landed estates prospered, buttressing their owners’ sense of defiance. Yet falling mortality among nobles left many short of property to inherit, increasing the demand for employment beyond what the clergy, the law, the military, and royal, ecclesiastical and aristocratic patrons were able to supply. Some moved into towns and took up trade. Warsaw mushroomed, its growing pains exacerbated by the culture clash between rustic ‘virtue’ and metropolitan ‘vice’ – a staple of many nobles’ classical education. Even royalist poets began to censure fashionable foreign follies more severely than mindless traditionalism. Citizens educated in the new spirit of enlightened patriotism were more inclined to question royal and aristocratic patrons, who had to compete for their support. Following the bad-tempered sejm of 1786, the king saw an opportunity to mobilise the middling szlachta behind him ‘against the great names of the opposition’.

Catherine’s plan for a grand progress to the Crimea, annexed in 1783, gave Poniatowski the opportunity to meet her in the Dnieper (he would have needed the sejm’s permission



to leave the Commonwealth). The expected war between the Russians and Ottomans might at last allow him to persuade the empress that Poland-Lithuania could be a useful ally. It would be necessary to confederate the sejm to conclude the alliance, increase revenue and expand the army. Victories and perhaps a share in the spoils would raise his prestige and reduce the Commonwealth's exposure to a further partition.

Dampened spirits

Catherine agreed to a meeting. While he waited for the ice on the Dnieper to melt, the cream of the Polish-Lithuanian aristocracy paid their respects to the empress in the neglected old city of Kiev, which the Commonwealth had lost to

Muscovy more than a century earlier. On the morning of 6 May 1787, the imperial flotilla sailed into view. A launch reached the shore about noon. The king and his entourage were dampened by squally showers. Choppy water and sandbanks meant it took them an hour to reach the imperial galley. Once aboard, the empress allowed the king just five minutes of *tête-à-tête* before they re-emerged from her cabinet. Potemkin took care of Poniatowski for much of the afternoon. He approved the king's proposals and Catherine promised to read them. She found the small-talk irksome and was relieved to bid her guest farewell at eight o'clock. An hour later, 'Vesuvius' erupted.

After a brief meeting with the Austrian ruler Joseph II, who was hurrying to accompany

**'Queen Catherine's Dream',
English engraving, 1791.**

Catherine around the Crimea, Poniatowski began the journey back to Warsaw. Charles, Prince de Ligne, a cosmopolitan gossip travelling with the flotilla, joked that the king had spent 'three months and three million [ducats] for three hours' with the empress. This witticism, though inaccurate, became the enduring image of the voyage to Kaniów. Poniatowski's real achievement there was to avoid the potential political disaster of Catherine honouring Branicki and other opposition magnates, perhaps even approving their rival plans, which would have led to rule by oligarchy. She had treated some of the more prominent aristocrats presented to her in Kiev with disdain.

Unfortunately for the king, the empress only gave a conditional acceptance to part of his plans in the summer of 1788. The consequences proved far reaching. Poniatowski realised that his enforced passivity cost him the political initiative as the opposition flexed its muscles and a Russophobic 'ferment of minds, especially among youth', spread through the szlachta. The sejmiki that elected and instructed envoys to the sejm of 1788 served notice that there was little appetite for war against the Ottoman Empire, but much for an expanded army, as long as the burden fell on the clergy, burghers and Jews.

The Great Sejm

Within a month of its opening on 7 October 1788 the sejm cast off the Russian guarantee and moved Poland-Lithuania closer to Prussia. By the beginning of 1789 it had reduced the monarch to little more than a cipher. The Commonwealth, sovereign for the first time in decades, embarked on the path which ended in its immolation. The Great Sejm of 1788-92, the 'Polish Revolution', created a new kind of politics, in which words and votes had more tangible consequences. The monarch made a comeback under the slogan 'the king with the nation, the nation with the king' and rode an anti-aristocratic wave among the middling



szlachta. Reforms were made to the structure of government and the social order, whose high point was the *Law on Government* acclaimed on 3 May 1791. It has a serious claim to be Europe's first modern constitution, preceding that of France by four months.

The Constitution of 3 May achieved much of Poniatowski's dream of an English-style parliamentary monarchy. It also left much to be completed by legislation in the final year of the sejm. Passed in an atmosphere of harmony and trust, these laws prepared the ground for the nation of the future. All inhabitants of the Commonwealth would enjoy a measure of personal liberty and property, while both landed and urban proprietors would have full political rights. The protection promised by the Constitution to people of all faiths, not only those hitherto tolerated, and the generous arrangements made for the autonomous governance of the Orthodox and principal Protestant Churches, show that the Catholic szlachta had once again learned to deal with – if not embrace – religious diversity.

This progressive path to the 19th century

Tadeusz Kościuszko,
19th-century engraving.

would soon be blocked. Having imposed a victor's peace on the Ottomans, in the spring of 1792 Catherine sent two of her armies into the Commonwealth. Against the odds, the Polish and Lithuanian forces made fighting retreats. But the Commonwealth could not win this undeclared war, especially as its former ally Prussia would probably have invaded from the west (in a reverse scenario to 1939). Nevertheless, the immediate military outcome was still in doubt when on 23 July 1792 the king convinced a majority of ministers to back his decision to capitulate. The relieved Russians installed a servile regime led by malcontent magnates. Their chaotic failings, combined with the outbreak of the French Revolutionary wars, helped persuade Catherine to agree to a devastating second partition with Prussia in 1793. Like the first, it was ratified by a confederated sejm. The fiercely fought 1794 insurrection led by Tadeusz Kościuszko once again demonstrated the Commonwealth's vitality, before being overwhelmed by Russian forces. The uprising prompted the third and final partition between Russia, Austria and Prussia in 1795. The Commonwealth's existence formally ended with Poniatowski's abdication.

Failed state?

The ignominious terms of the abdication were part of the partitioning monarchs' efforts to convince themselves that the Commonwealth had been a failed state, which deserved to be put out of its misery by its neighbours. The szlachta has been condemned for its anarchy, oppression, egoism, bigotry and myopia, and blamed for the 'collapse' of the state. The tide among historians of the Commonwealth is now running the other way: there is even a tendency to extol its republican civic values, ethnic diversity, religious tolerance and voluntary unions between nations as a precursor of the European Union.

Part of this idealistic rehabilitation is exaggerated. The crises of the mid-18th-

century Commonwealth were obvious. The reformers' tragedy was that the circumstances were extraordinarily unfavourable. Since the end of the 17th century, the Commonwealth had been systematically manipulated by its neighbours, especially Russia. The political community was unable to exercise its sovereignty until 1788. It is hardly surprising that 18th-century Polish-Lithuanian politics presented a depressing spectacle. But beneath the surface much was changing. The manner of the Commonwealth's end was unpredictable, even if the fact of it was likely. The challenges posed by the social and cultural trends building up over several decades might well have disrupted the Commonwealth's final years, whether or not Poniatowski had journeyed to Kaniów. It is a tribute to the king and other statesmen that these forces for change were channelled into the reforms of the Great Sejm. The principal strength of the Constitution of 3 May lay in its blend of the Commonwealth's republican traditions with foreign influences. Another reason for success lay in the gradual tempo of reform, which Edmund Burke favourably contrasted with the violent revolution in France. These ensured that the szlachta endorsed the Constitution at the sejmiiki held in February 1792. It was the threat posed by this revived Commonwealth to the interests of the neighbouring absolute monarchies that precipitated the invasion of 1792 and then the second and third partitions.

Few periods in Polish-Lithuanian history saw such dynamic changes and traumatic events as the reign of Poniatowski. The fact that it ended in the Commonwealth's annihilation should not blind us to the potential which was illuminated before it was destroyed.

Richard Butterwick is Professor of Polish-Lithuanian History at University College London and author of *The Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth 1733-1795: Light and Flame* (Yale University Press, 2020).

Further reading

● Norman Davies, *God's Playground: A History of Poland Volume I – The Origins to 1795* (Oxford University Press, 2005)

● Andrzej Chwalba and Krzysztof Zamorski, *The Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth: History, Legacy, Memory* (Routledge, 2020)





THE MORAL OF THE STORY

Illustrated picture books in Victorian England reached new aesthetic heights. But was it always for the benefit of the children?

Lucie Duggan

The *Nation* journal observed in 1879 that ‘every holiday season brings a fresh assortment of stories for the young which, as being new, recommend themselves as gifts and do their share in the cultivation of juvenile ethics’. The idea that literature should play a part in the moral education of young readers was nothing new. The first picture book aimed at children – *A Little Pretty Pocket Book* – was published in 1744 by John Newbery, with a frontispiece that announced its aim: ‘Instruction with Delight.’ However, with the arrival in the 19th century of high-quality colour printing, picture books began to play their part in the cultivation of juvenile aesthetics, too. As the *Graphic* magazine announced approvingly in 1881: ‘Children of the nineteenth century ought to grow up with well-cultured artistic tastes if they profit by the daintily illustrated books provided for their delectation.’ Over the course of the century, children’s books were transformed from utilitarian fare to objects of art, with the *Art Journal* declaring in 1881: ‘Art for the nursery has become Art indeed.’

Instrumental in this process was the pioneering work of the wood engraver and colour printer Edmund Evans, who believed that beautiful picture books could be created and sold inexpensively if printed in the correct quantity. By perfecting his own colour woodblock printing technique, Evans was able to craft a high-quality artistic book, with stunning illustrations. Evans collaborated with three artists: Walter Crane, Randolph Caldecott and Kate Greenaway. The triumvirate of Evans, as they became known, were among the most influential children’s book illustrators of the era. While they did not all work exclusively with him – Crane was an established artist and engraver and Caldecott was a well-known political cartoonist – their names became synonymous with the nursery and toy books of the late 19th century and their illustrations of nursery rhymes, fairy tales and fables became emblematic of the so-called ‘Golden Age’ of picture book illustration.

Cult of the child

Evans, along with publishers such as George Routledge and Frederick Warne, tapped into a commercial appetite for beautiful picture

books that would please not only children, but their parents, too. The Victorian era saw the emergence of ‘the cult of the child’, an idealised view of childhood that proved popular with middle-class consumers and which fuelled a demand for sentimental, childhood-inspired commodities. New trends in home decorating focused on the importance of the nursery as a place where the tastes of the young art connoisseur were formed. This was of particular concern for home interior magazine writers, such as H.C. Gaskin, who declared:

It is only too common to banish to the nursery every picture that is not likely to stand the fire of criticism to which it would be exposed elsewhere. This is an outrage upon innocence. Because the child knows nothing of art, it should not have its first perceptions awakened by false representations of art.

Though the nursery was primarily intended as a space where the children of the well-off could be cared for by governesses and nursemaids out of sight of the rest of the household, it came to function as an important indicator of taste in the homes of discerning Victorians and the objects and pictures on display were expected to be chosen with care. The picture books of Crane, Caldecott and Greenaway were ideal choices, capable of delighting both the young occupants of the nursery and their aesthetically conscious parents. The renowned Victorian actress Ellen Terry remarked that her children ‘were allowed no rubbishy picture-books, but from the first, Japanese prints and fans lined the nursery walls. If injudicious friends gave the wrong sort of present, it was promptly burned’.

The eye-catching pages of luxury picture books subtly referenced the latest trends in home decorating. In Walter Crane’s illustrations, characters from fairy tales appeared in fashionable, contemporary interiors. The art tiles that adorned the fireplace of Cinderella’s kitchen, as well as the ornate dresser lined with willow-patterned china in *The Frog Prince*, epitomised the Queen Anne Revival style seen in fashionable homes. The sumptuous chamber of *Princess Belle Étoile*, with a bay window embellished with leaded roundel patterns in stained glass, referenced the design motifs of the Arts and

The little i Play.



STOOL-BALL.

THE Ball once struck with Art and Care,
And drove impetuous through the Air,
Swift round his Course the Gamester flies,
Or his Stool's taken by Surprise.

RULE of LIFE.

Bestow your Alms whene'er you see
An Object in Necessity.

SWIM-

The great K Play.



SWIMMING.

WHEN the Sun's Beams have
warm'd the Air,
Our Youth to some cool Brook repair;
In whose refreshing Streams they play,
To the last Remnant of the Day.

RULE of LIFE.

Think ere you speak; for Words, once
flown,
Once utter'd, are no more your own.

C 4

BASE-

JOHN NEWBERY

Spread from *A Little
Pretty Pocket Book*, 1770.

Previous spread:
Beauty and the Beast,
1899, illustration by
Walter Crane.

Crafts movement, which found expression in the domestic architecture of figures such as Norman Shaw. The luxurious rooms of Crane's *Beauty and the Beast* were filled with delicately carved Queen Anne furniture, William Morris-style wallpaper and Victorian bric-a-brac, which would have been familiar to readers of contemporary home decoration catalogues and magazines such as *Beautiful Houses* and *Fashionable Furniture*.

Appropriate appropriations

The Victorian taste for the exotic was acknowledged throughout Crane's work. Japanese art, in particular, was hugely influential. Following the first trade agreement between England and Japan in 1859, Japanese prints, fans, books and textiles flooded the European market. In *Aladdin* (1875), Crane depicted princesses draped in kaleidoscopic kimonos. In *Buckle My Shoe* (1869) an 'aesthetic' home was depicted, with a mother sitting in an ebonised Anglo-Japanese style

chair of the kind created by the architect and designer E.W. Godwin. She holds a Japanese fan and behind her is a screen decorated with a Japanese woodblock print. Crane's own style developed under the influence of Japanese art, having received some Toyokuni prints from a friend returning from Japan around 1867. He later expressed an admiration for the 'definite black outline and flat brilliant as well as delicate colours, vivid dramatic and decorative feeling' of these prints. His illustrations for *The Three Bears* (1873) attempted to capture their style; Crane depicted the figures of Goldilocks and the three bears, seen through a window, as flattened, simplified forms, while the beds, table and chairs are shown from a bird's-eye view.

The success of luxury picture books by Crane and his contemporaries was reflected in a demand for nursery-themed merchandise, including wallpapers that featured their illustrations. Greenaway's immaculately dressed, cherubic infants in English country gardens enjoyed immense popularity and prompted a consumer appetite for 'Greenaway-style' merchandise, including figurines, dolls and painting books. Crane's fairy tales were reproduced as wallpaper designs by the internationally renowned manufacturer of luxury 'art' wallpaper, Jeffrey & Co.

Fairy tales and fables were not just put to use in the service of decorating aesthetically pleasing nursery rooms, however. With the growing scholarly interest in the documentation and preservation of the folk tales of Britain and continental Europe writers and illustrators repurposed the old stories to convey political, social and moralising commentary on life in 19th-century Britain. In 1853 George Cruikshank, illustrator of Charles Dickens' *Oliver Twist*, began to publish a series of traditional tales revised as a stern campaign for teetotalism. A reformed alcoholic, Cruikshank had become a strong advocate of abstinence and published *The Bottle* and *The Drunkard's Children*, which told of a family's ruin due to drinking. In the fairy tale *Hop O' My Thumb* Cruikshank depicted Hop's father as a count who had lost all his money through drinking. In *Jack and the Beanstalk* he admonished the alcoholism of the giant, while in *Puss in Boots* the ogre was transformed into a drunkard.

UTAGAWA TOYOKUNI

Chofu no Tamagara
(‘Tamagara area of Chofu,
Tokyo’), c.1789.

六玉川 武藏
調布



江戸

WALTER CRANE

Top: illustration from
The Three Bears,
c.1895-98.
Bottom: illustration
from *The Frog Prince*,
c.1900.





Top: illustration from *Jack and the Beanstalk*, 1879. Bottom: title page from *Jack and the Beanstalk*, both c.1895.

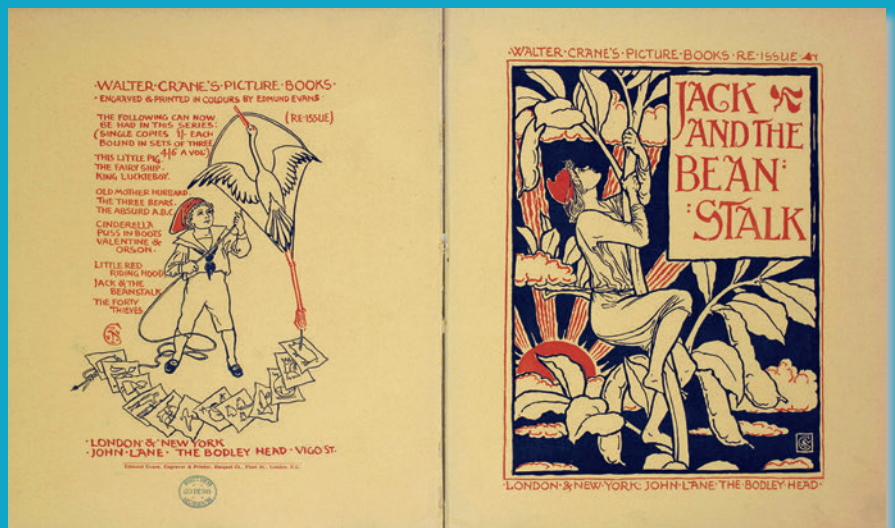
Down the road and down the bean-stalk swiftly ran and clambered Jack,

Joy was in his manly bosom, and the harp upon his back.

Down the giant scrambles after Jack, but little does *he* reck,—

With an axe he cuts the bean-stalk, and the giant breaks his neck.

After this, I need not tell you, Jack resolved to settle down, Stay at home, climb no more bean-stalks, be respected in the town.



Cruikshank's *Fairytales* drew the ire of Dickens, his collaborator and friend. In an essay entitled *Fraud on the Fairies*, published in 1853 in his weekly magazine *Household Words*, Dickens denounced Cruikshank's appropriation of popular old stories for moralising ends. 'To preserve them in their usefulness', Dickens wrote:

they must be as much preserved in their simplicity, and purity, and innocent extravagance, as if they were actual fact. Whosoever alters them to suit his own opinions, whatever they are, is guilty, to our thinking, of an act of presumption, and appropriates to himself what does not belong to him.

Undeterred, Cruikshank continued to use fairy tales to preach his message of abstinence. His *Fairy Library* (1853-64) was not a commercial success.

Socialist vision

For Crane, a politically engaged figure who had been active in the socialist movement in England throughout the 1880s, the fairy tale provided an opportunity for political expression. Crane's picture book illustrations blended image with story to reflect the artist's support for the socialist cause. His version of *Jack and the Beanstalk* was a political allegory of the triumph of socialism, in which the hero, Jack, sporting the red Phrygian cap and silhouetted against the rising sun – potent socialist symbols – defeats the monstrous giant who hoards his wealth in his castle. In *Baby's Own Aesop* (1887) Crane reworked the ancient fable 'The Bundle of Sticks' as an allegory of modern socialism. In an effort to unite his quarrelling sons, a father asks them to break a bundle of sticks. When they fail to do so, he takes the bundle apart and gives them each a single stick, which they break easily. The moral of the story – 'strength is in unity' – echoed the trade union movement's slogans of solidarity. The red cap of liberty appears again, worn by the figure breaking the twig in half. Crane would go on to produce illustrations for *The Child's Socialist Reader* (1905), which included a fairy tale entitled 'The Happy Valley', featuring a villainous giant named 'Monopoly' and his accomplices, 'Capital' and 'Competition'.

The illustrations of Randolph Caldecott reworked the fables of ancient Greece to reflect on contemporary political issues of the day. The Chester-born artist had completed an edition of the tales alongside his brother, the Reverend Alfred Caldecott in 1883. The frontispiece of the volume announced: 'Some of Aesop's Fables with Modern Instances shewn in designs by Randolph Caldecott.' A prolific cartoonist, who had been employed as a humorous artist on the magazine *London Society* as well as contributing to *Punch*, Caldecott used the fables to parody aspects of British society as well as political issues.

For example, in his illustrations for *The Frogs Desiring a King* Caldecott caricatured the Irish Home Rule movement, a major issue in 19th-century British politics. A group of frogs 'grieved at their own lawless condition' are depicted pleading with Zeus to send them a king. Zeus, 'perceiving their simplicity', sends them a log of wood. After a while, the frogs, seeing the log remain motionless, demand that Zeus give them a new ruler. Zeus, exasperated, sends them a stork, which immediately devours them all. The subsequent illustration depicts 'the modern instance' of the fable: the frogs have been transformed into human figures on the shores of Ireland; the log bears the inscription 'Land Bill,' while the words 'Give us Home Rule' are seen scrawled in the sand.

The volume was commercially unsuccessful, however. Caldecott himself expressed disappointment with his contribution, writing to a friend: 'Do not expect much from this book. When I see proofs of it I wonder and regret that I did not approach the subject more seriously.'

Such works demonstrate the extent to which children's book illustrators were simultaneously catering to an adult, politically aware audience, as well as to the young readers for whom picture books were nominally intended – sometimes pleasing neither. While the children of the privileged middle classes doubtlessly enjoyed and benefited from the supply of beautifully illustrated reading material available, the adult was both producer and consumer. In *The Child and His Book* (1891) Mrs E.M. Field noted that:

The nursery picture-book has a curious tendency to find its way to the drawing-room



GEORGE CRUIKSHANK

'The Bottle', from
The Drunkard's Children,
engraving, 1847.

table and to the smoking-room lounge, even perhaps to the serious study-room shelf. And uncles and aunts who buy these charming productions 'for the children' are frequently discovered to be themselves gloating over them in a corner.

Many adults were drawn to the idealised world represented in the illustrations of children's picture books. Greenaway's idyllic rural settings – where well-behaved children play serenely – provided a fantasy world of eternal childhood for Victorians. Key to the success of Greenaway's illustrations was the costume in which she dressed the inhabitants of her make-believe world. She created her own miniature fashions, based on the Regency style of the late 18th century. These designs inspired a line of children's clothing by the London department store Liberty's.

Demand for Greenaway-style costumes was fuelled by the Victorian passion for 'fancy dress'. Magazines such as *Good Housekeeping* suggested outfits for Greenaway-inspired parties. Despite their associations with children, such parties were often intended for adults. Popular publications such as Mrs Herbert B. Linscott's *Bright Ideas for Entertaining* (1905) dispensed advice on

KATE GREENAWAY

Left: title page and design for *Under the Window*, 1879, engraved by Edmund Evans.

Below: engraving from *La Mode Illustrée*, with a child (right) dressed in Kate Greenaway costume, c.1905.

Right: Alice Liddell photographed by Lewis Carroll, 1858.



UNDER THE WINDOW

PICTURES & RHYMES
for Children
by
KATE GREENAWAY

Engraved & Printed
by
EDMUND · EVANS.



LONDON
FREDERICK WARNE AND CO.
AND NEW YORK



K.G.







RANDOLPH CALDECOTT

'Some of Aesop's Fables
with Modern Instances
shewn in designs by
Randolph Caldecott.'
Illustrations from *The Frogs
Desiring a King*, 1883.



organising parties and social gatherings tinged with childish charm; a New Year's Eve party, for example, might involve 'a young man dressed as a baby, in a long white dress', whose appearance would signal the new year.

Greenaway's picture books achieved enormous commercial success; her first book, *Under the Window*, had sold 100,000 copies by the close of the century. Her work received high praise from prominent intellectual critics and scholars, such as John Ruskin and Marion Spielmann, who saw in her illustrations an escape from the modern world and the perceived ills of industrialisation. In his Oxford lecture of 1880 entitled *Fairy Land* Ruskin marvelled at Greenaway's invented idyll:

There are no railroads in it, to carry the children away with, are there? No tunnel or pit-mouths to swallow them up, no league-long viaducts – no blinkered iron bridges? There are only winding brooks, wooden foot-bridges, and grassy hills without any holes cut into them!

Privately, Ruskin engaged in a lengthy correspondence with Greenaway in which he urged her to develop her technique and persistently requested drawings of what he referred to as 'girlies'. Ruskin's letters reveal a troubling fixation on Greenaway's pre-pubescent female characters. In a letter from July 1883 Ruskin asked Greenaway to furnish him with drawings of her girl figures unclothed:

Will you – (it's all for your own good – !) make her stand up and then draw her for me without a cap – and, without her shoes, – (because of the heels) and without her mittens, and without her – frock and frills? And let me see exactly how tall she is – and – how – round. It will be so good of and for you – And to and for me.

Intercepting the letter, Ruskin's cousin and caretaker Joan Severn, in apparent alarm at the request, pencilled an instruction to Greenaway to 'Do nothing of the kind'.

Bad examples

Ruskin's fixation on Greenaway's delicate drawings underscores some of the uneasy contradictions upon which the Victorian conceptualisation of childhood – and in

particular, girlhood – rested. While childhood was glorified as a state of innocence, children were also commodified and fetishised as never before. Victorian literary figures celebrated the purity and innocence of the figure of the child while simultaneously eroticising it. Lewis Carroll's carefully staged photographs of Alice Liddell, styled in various costumes, appear to the contemporary viewer as troublingly sexualised and epitomise the objectifying adult gaze that is so prevalent in Victorian culture. As the poet Ernest Dowson – one of many eminent Victorian literary figures known to have pursued children as sexual partners – remarked in his 1889 article 'The Cult of the Child': 'There are an ever increasing number of people who receive from the beauty of childhood, in art as in life, an exquisite pleasure.'

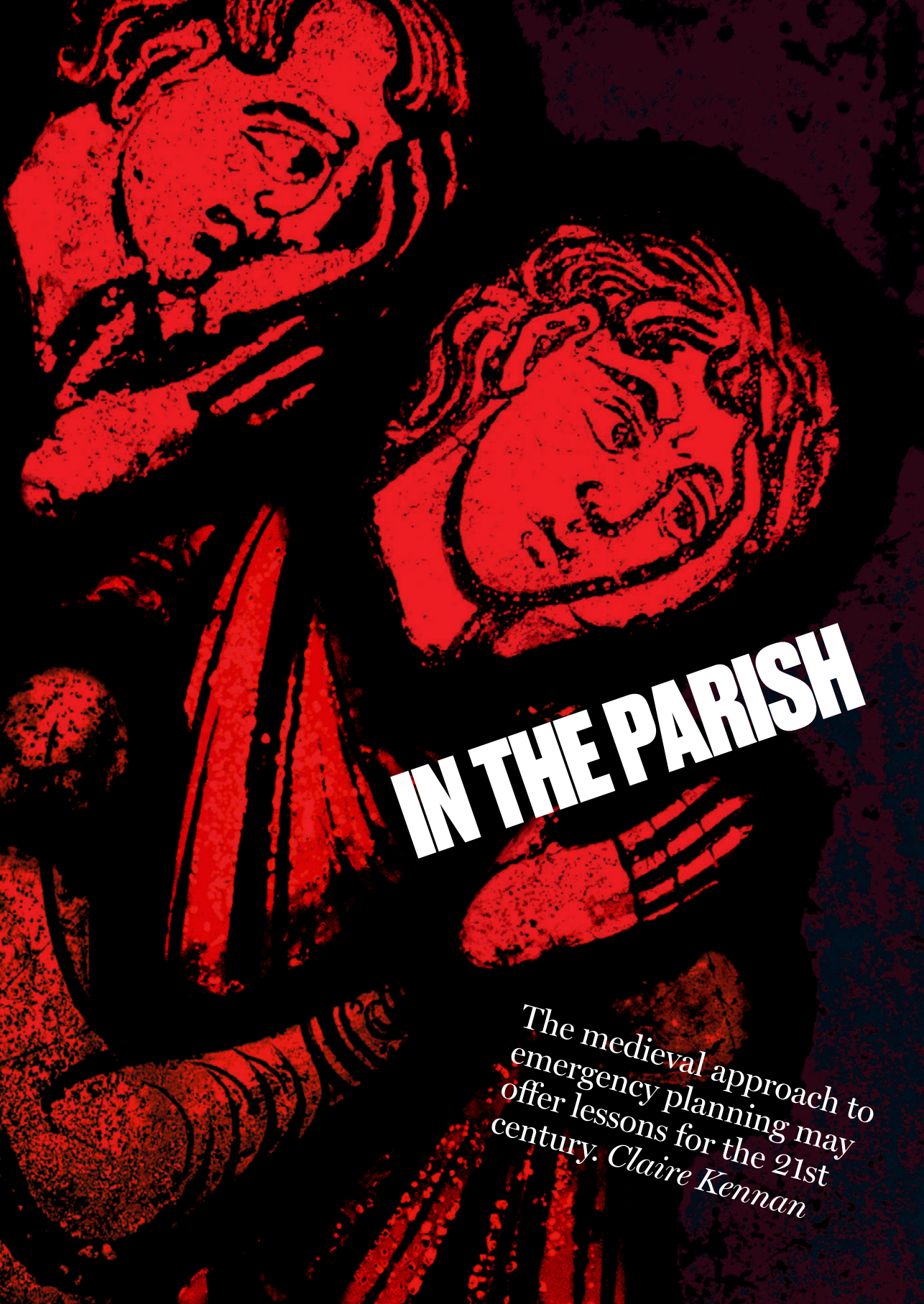
The dual readership of picture books was recognised and accepted by Victorian audiences, as contemporary reviews show. The *Art Journal* in 1881 referred to high-class picture books, 'nominally intended for the little ones, but also catering to the grown-up folks', while the *Atlantic Monthly* described the trend in 1894 as 'not juvenile literature but books for the big about the little'. The illustrators of the period were aware that the commercial success of their picture books depended on their appeal to adults, equally, if not perhaps more so, than to children. As illustrators of luxurious, colour picture books, they were highly receptive to the tastes and sensibilities of their middle-class market and the people and places they depicted reflect this.

Many Victorians believed firmly in leading by example. As Samuel Smiles' *Self-Help* urged: 'Example is one of the most potent of instructors, though it teaches without a tongue.' Children's books were important instruments through which to channel Victorian values and ideals. As Smiles put it: 'The nation comes from the nursery.' In seeking to shelter readers from all that was deemed unpleasant in Victorian society, they allowed adults a form of escapism and a means to see the world through the eyes of children while encouraging young readers to see the world through an adult gaze.

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PANDEMICS



IN THE PARISH

The medieval approach to emergency planning may offer lessons for the 21st century. *Claire Kennan*

In the summer of 1348 the Chronicle of the Grey Friars at Lynn recorded the arrival in England of the Black Death. It described how sailors from Gascony had disembarked in the port of Weymouth bringing with them 'the seeds of the terrible pestilence'. From the south coast the plague spread rapidly throughout England. The medieval chronicler Henry Knighton remarked how 'few lay sick for more than two or three days' before dying. According to another medieval chronicler, Thomas Walsingham, there were barely enough living to bury the dead. Within 18 months of the disease arriving on English shores it had killed approximately half the population; the repercussions were felt for two centuries.

When we think about the Black Death we usually reflect on the social and economic upheaval, the cultural changes, artistic developments and, of course, the mortality rate. But how did the Black Death affect the parish, that most basic administrative and ecclesiastical unit with which ordinary people had most contact? The threat to the parish during the Black Death was real: drastic measures and emergency legislation were implemented to ensure that churches remained open, funded and staffed at a time when people needed them most.

The medieval parish

In the later Middle Ages, the parish was the central contact point between the people and the institutional Church; it facilitated the basic teaching of the liturgy in the localities and ensured the administration of the sacraments to the laity. By the time of the Black Death there were approximately 9,000 parish churches across England, with each parochial unit supporting a parish priest who had responsibility for all pastoral and sacramental duties. Parishioners would attend services at the church on Sundays, but also on the numerous saints' days that punctuated the liturgical year. But the medieval parish church did far more than simply provide a place of worship; it was also a space for local people to come together to celebrate baptisms and weddings, mourn the loss of loved ones with funeral services and intercessory masses and to socialise through the various revels, ales and plays that were put on throughout the year.

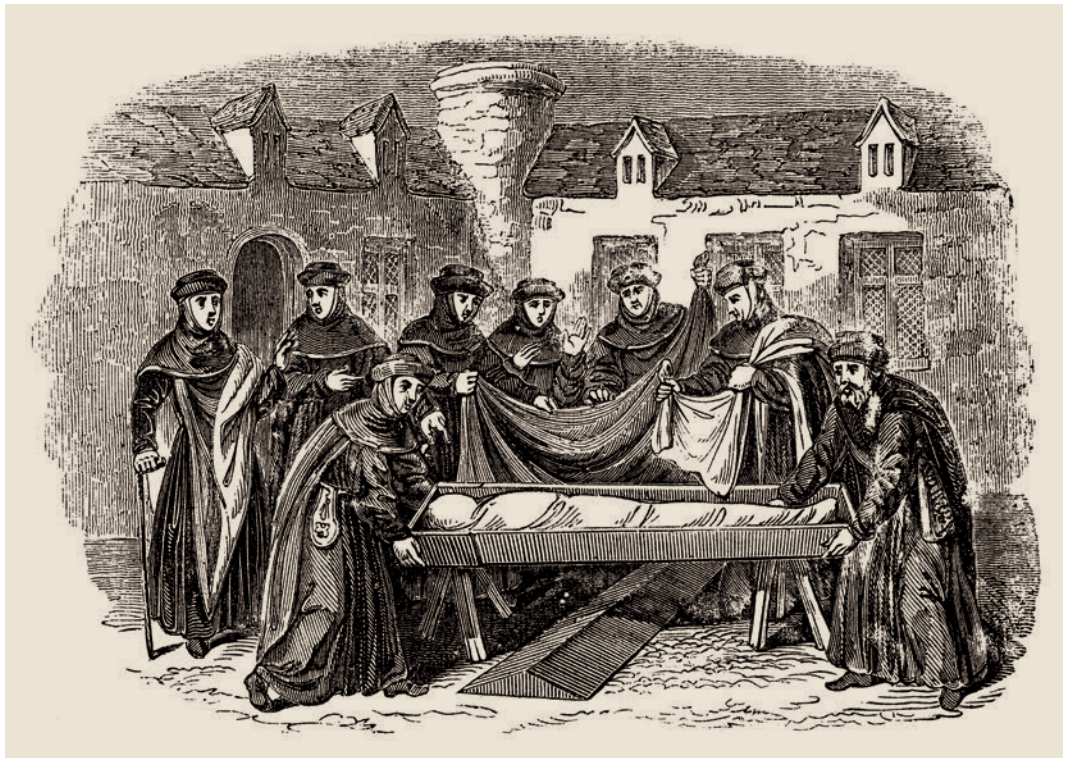
The parish church was the centre of late medieval communities across Europe.

Of all those who died during the first outbreak of the Black Death, the parish clergy were among the worst affected. It is not surprising that parish priests, who were at the forefront of administering the last rites to the dying, suffered a mortality rate of approximately 50 per cent as a result of their increased and persistent exposure to the disease. Many parishes across the country were left without a priest and, according to contemporary chroniclers, replacements could not be found 'for love or money'. One chronicler noted that before the arrival of the Black Death there had been a 'glut' of priests, but that during the pandemic there was such a shortage that those who were available doubled or even tripled their rates.

In the medieval mindset the parish church and its priest were central in preparing people for death. As the Black Death was widely believed to have been sent as divine punishment for mankind's sins, the Church played a central role in appeasing God and preventing the spread and voracity of the disease. The lack of a priest in a parish was, therefore, of deep concern. Not only did a shortage of parish priests mean that the regular delivery of the sacraments and the liturgy were halted, it also meant that people could die without receiving the last rites or giving their last confession. This could have terrible consequences, resulting in a prolonged stay in Purgatory. The situation became so dire that the Bishop of Bath and Wells issued an emergency mandate stating that laymen (and even women) were able to hear the confessions of the dying:

We understand that many people are dying without the sacrament of penance, because they do not know what they ought to do in such an emergency ... Make it known speedily and publicly ... to everyone, but particularly to those who have already fallen sick, that if when on the point of death they cannot secure the services of a properly ordained priest, they should make confession of their sins ... to any lay person, even a woman if a man is not available.

Another tactic taken by the Church to overcome its severely depleted parish staffing was to allow



A burial ceremony for a monk in a 14th-century English religious house, 19th-century engraving. Previous spread: *Fear of Plague in the House of Fitzeisulf*, a detail from Trinity Chapel window, Canterbury Cathedral, 14th century.

‘Of all those who died during the first outbreak of the Black Death, the parish clergy were among the worst affected’

for extra, emergency ordinations. Following a petition from William Zouche, Archbishop of York, Pope Clement VI allowed for additional ordinations to be made in the archdiocese. These did cause some concern, however, about a decline in the standard of clerical teaching in the parishes. There were several complaints, usually from chroniclers, that the quality of the clergy was falling because unsuitable candidates were being rushed through and admitted to the priesthood. According to one chronicler these newly ordained plague priests ‘were illiterate, no better than laymen – for even if they could read, they did not understand what they read’.

The bodies pile up

It was not only a lack of priests that caused problems in the parish. With the number of bodies piling up, parish churches soon ran out of space to bury the dead. Emergency measures were taken so that new burial grounds could be consecrated across the country, sometimes in quick succession. In the Nottinghamshire town of Newark it was noted that ‘the burial ground of the church, because it is so small and has no room to expand, is not adequate’ and



The funeral of a plague victim depicted in the Trinity Chapel window, Canterbury Cathedral.

additional land had to be swiftly purchased and consecrated in order to cope with the overwhelming demand. It was a story that was repeated across the country as parish churches struggled to accommodate the ever-increasing number of burials that had to be performed.

The absence of a parish priest also came with the threat of church closure. To avoid this previously unthinkable outcome, some parish churches and their incomes were granted to religious houses during and immediately after the first wave of the Black Death. Several religious communities saw this as a good way to recover some of their own lost income, while also keeping the parish church open. In 1350 the church of Cotham near Newark was appropriated to the Augustinian priory of Thurgarton, while in 1351 the church of Whitchurch in Devon was appropriated to the monastery at Tavistock. In other instances parishes were amalgamated, as was the case with the parishes of Great and Little Collington in Hertfordshire in 1351. There, the ravages of the Black Death had left both parishes so depleted that they could barely afford the cost of a single priest between them.

‘Parish churches struggled to accommodate the ever-increasing number of burials that had to be performed’

The decision to amalgamate was made by the Bishop of Hereford following a petition from the parishioners of the two villages.

It was not only the institutional Church that implemented emergency planning measures at the time of the Black Death; parishioners also took matters into their own hands, introducing insurance policies. 'For a Christian man to die well and soundly ... he must know how to die', wrote the anonymous 14th-century author of the *Book of the Craft of Dying*. But this was often the last thing the Black Death allowed: death was frequently sudden, agonising, even disgusting. The author goes on to note that 'bodily death is the most dreadful of all terrifying things [but] spiritual death of the soul is as much more horrible and detestable as the soul is more worthy and precious than the body'. During the Black Death it was the threat of an unsecured end, without provision made for the soul, that sparked fear. For those who faced death daily in the years following 1348, adequate remembrance of their souls through the prayers of the living became of the utmost importance.

In order to prepare their souls and ensure that they would have a proper burial, with all the requisite prayers, huge numbers of people joined their local parish guilds. These were established both before and long after the Black Death as a corporate expression of devotion to a particular saint or holy object, but their popularity soared during the plague years. One of the central activities of parish guilds was ensuring that its members (all of whom paid an entry fee and an annual subscription) would have a proper burial and have their ascent to Heaven eased through the guild's intercessory masses. For the generations who lived through the Black Death this was an appealing and necessary prospect and those who joined were clearly interested in the eternal benefits. By 1500 the popularity of parish guilds had increased to such an extent that it has been estimated there were around 30,000.

Glorious expression

While it could be argued that the Black Death turned people away from religion, fracturing Christianity and opening the way for the Reformation, the evidence from the English parish in the two centuries following its arrival

presents a different picture. Medieval parish churches had relied on funding and gifts from parishioners since synodical decrees in the 13th century had made the care and maintenance of the church nave the laity's responsibility. The generations who survived the Black Death and its recurrent waves in the 1360s and 1390s had more money and land than their forebears and took the care of their parish church into their own hands with enthusiasm. From the surviving records, we see that even the most obscure and remote village churches were fully equipped, largely as a result of lay gifts either given during life or after death through bequests in wills. Parishioners also lavished money on the maintenance, repair and rebuilding of their churches, sometimes with spectacular results. Not only were they ensuring the survival of their church, they were also guaranteeing it was the most glorious expression of devotion that the parish could muster.

Seven centuries on and the situation in England could not be more different. With church attendance plummeting before 2020, the Covid-19 pandemic has further accelerated the decline of the parish. Now churches are faced with closures and redundancies in an effort to cut costs. With 57 per cent of Britons never attending church, there are calls for parish churches to diversify their offerings beyond the usual baptisms, weddings and funerals. In short, parish churches are being urged to take action similar to that of their medieval predecessors, where church buildings were regularly used for purposes other than worship and where, in a time of global emergency, the parish was agile and responsive. From emergency confessions and ordinations to amalgamating churches and expanding burial grounds, the institutional Church sought to deal with the problems faced in the parish in the most efficient way possible. Parishioners, too, implemented their own short- and long-term insurance policies, with everything from joining parish guilds to paying for the repair of the church roof. In order for the parish church of today to avoid becoming a relic, it might perhaps take some lessons from its medieval past.

Claire Kennan is Digital Engagement Fellow for the British Association for Local History.

PLATYPUS

Indescribable: platypus etching, 19th century, based on one of the first illustrations of a platypus by George Shaw, 1809.



Defying
categorisation
since its discovery,
was the platypus
a mammal,
a reptile, or
something else?

Alexander Lee

NATURAL HISTORIES

On 29 August 1884 William Hay Caldwell sent the most important telegram ever written about a platypus. Then just 25 years old, he had spent four months searching for its eggs on the banks of the Burnett River in North Queensland – with little success. After much splashing around, he and his Aborigine assistants had found lungfish eggs, echidna eggs – everything, in short, but what they were really after. He could have been forgiven for wanting to give up. But a few days earlier he had shot a female. To his amazement, he found that not only had she laid an egg, but had actually been laying another when he had caught her. When he cracked one open, his excitement only grew. He dashed off a message to the annual meeting of the British Association for the Advancement of Science in Montreal. He kept it short – only four words. And to the telegraph operator, it probably seemed like gibberish. But it contained the answer to a century-long puzzle and transformed the way naturalists understood animal classification forever.

Sui generis?

The platypus had baffled European scientists ever since the first specimen had arrived in England in 1798. Sent by John Hunter, the governor of New South Wales, it consisted of a preserved skin rather than a complete body and had not fared well on the voyage. Although it was accompanied by a sketch, it was difficult to know quite what to make of it.

Some naturalists struggled to believe it was real. Bemused by the duck-like bill, the thick fur and the webbed feet, they assumed that it was a hoax by Chinese taxidermists, whose fondness for producing ‘mermaids’ out of fish tails and monkey heads was already well known.

Even when – in 1799 – George Shaw proved that Hunter’s specimen was genuine the mystery remained. What sort of creature was this? Since naturalists had only a skin, with no internal organs to work from, there was a limit to what they could say about its anatomy. But the problem was really about classification.

In principle, there shouldn’t have been a problem. Though taxonomy was as old as biology itself, the foundations of the modern science had been laid by Carl Linnaeus just 40 years before the arrival of Hunter’s platypus. Like most of his contemporaries, Linnaeus believed that all living things existed in the form which God had created them; but he broke new ground in attempting to introduce a system of classification based on observed similarities. He proposed five levels of classification: kingdom, class, order, genus, species. Within the animal kingdom there were six classes, including *mammalia* (mammals), *aves* (birds) and *amphibia* (reptiles and amphibians), for each of which he deduced a definition.

According to Linnaeus, *mammalia* suckled their young by means of ‘lactiferous teats’ (mammary glands), had teeth, breathed with a pair of lungs, generally had four limbs, were often covered in hair and

sometimes had tails – as well as a host of other characteristics. *Aves*, by contrast, laid eggs covered with a calcareous shell and had wings, but lacked external ears, external testes, wombs, diaphragms and bladders. *Amphibia* laid (usually) membranous eggs and also lacked a diaphragm; but occasionally had a ‘horrid poison’, too.

But Linneaus’ method was built on sand. Although the identification of similarities was sensible enough, his assumption that animals had always existed in their current forms proved a major weakness. Since this denied any causal affinity between species other than providence, it rendered his classifications arbitrary and made it impossible to determine which, if any, characteristics were essential to a class. This meant that any taxonomist trying to categorise an oddity like the platypus either had to adopt a pick ‘n’ mix approach to his definitions or just guess wildly about their place in Creation.

Of course, the platypus looked as if it should have been a mammal. Based on its fur, beak and webbed feet, Shaw – who gave it the name *Platypus anatus* – felt confident enough to class it with sloths, anteaters and other toothless mammals. But even he had his doubts. So much about it seemed wrong. Given the state of Hunter’s skin, it was hard to say exactly what, but there was enough to defy easy categorisation. Even after seeing another, better preserved, specimen the engraver Thomas Bewick admitted that he was so puzzled that he didn’t know how to classify it at all.

In *A General History of Quadrupeds* (1800), he described it as ‘an animal *sui generis*’, which appeared to have characteristics of ‘a fish, a bird, and a quadruped’ and seemed to be ‘related to nothing that we have hitherto seen’.

The more closely the platypus was studied, the deeper the mystery grew. In 1800 the German naturalist Johann Friedrich Blumenbach conducted the most detailed study to date. Since the name ‘platypus’ had already been given to a beetle, he rechristened it *Ornithorhynchus paradoxus*, literally, ‘bird-nosed paradox’. He was troubled by the females’ apparent lack of the characteristic which ‘had given rise to the name *mammalia* by which LINNEUS ha[d] distinguished them’ – namely, mammary glands. But he could not ignore the fact that they still had a number of other characteristics that did seem reminiscent of mammals. After rejigging Linneaus’ orders a bit, he therefore classed them with the web-footed *Palmata*.

Two years later Sir Everard Home took a rather different view. He reported that the male platypus had internal testes like reptiles and a cloaca (a single orifice for the digestive, urinary and reproductive tracts). At the time it was believed that cloacae belonged only to reptiles, amphibians and birds, and was indicative of egg-laying. Since this appeared to set the platypus apart from mammals ‘in a very remarkable manner’, Home therefore suggested that in the Great Chain of Being, in which God had assigned all created beings



Above: George Shaw, 19th-century engraving. Opposite: male platypus skin, held at the Natural History Museum.

‘I like the duck-billed platypus

Because it is anomalous.

I like the way it raises its family, Partly birdly, partly mammaly.’

Ogden Nash

a place according to their 'perfection', it stood below mammals, but above birds and reptiles/amphibians. Exactly where it belonged, however, was unclear.

Transformers?

Everything changed with the publication of Jean-Baptiste Lamarck's *Zoologie philosophique* in 1809. Lamarck argued that, rather than being static, all living things were in a constant state of change. Not only could they 'acquire' new attributes in response to environmental factors but, he claimed, they could also transmit those attributes to their offspring. As Charles Darwin later showed, this had obvious flaws: giraffes didn't become giraffes just by stretching their necks to reach higher up the tree. But it clearly suggested that, over time, one variety of animal could transform into another. The implications for taxonomy were immense. Rather than classifying animals according to a random hodge-podge of characteristics, it was now possible not only to trace the 'transformation' of animals over time, but also to determine more easily which characteristics were distinctive of a class or order and which were not. According to Lamarck, this made it easier to deal with 'paradoxes' like platypuses. Based on his work, the French naturalist Étienne Geoffroy Saint-Hilaire argued that, since the platypus didn't have mammary glands, it 'clearly' wasn't a mammal and should therefore be included in a completely new class of vertebrates, which he charmingly dubbed the

Monotremata ('one holed').

But rather than settling matters, this only seemed to make things worse. Influenced by Lamarck's theories, the German anatomist Johann Meckel started looking more closely at some of the platypus' odder features, perhaps in the expectation of solidifying Geoffroy Saint-Hilaire's claims. What he found came as a surprise. While he established that male platypuses had a poison gland – usually associated with reptiles and amphibians – he also discovered that the females did have mammary glands after all. Clearly, the picture was too confused for any definite conclusions to be reached; but suddenly, the platypus was looking a lot more like a mammal than a short time before.

In 1832 Lauderdale Maule, a young Scottish soldier, published two papers which bolstered this idea further. Although he acknowledged that platypuses had some reptilian characteristics, and even identified certain bones in the pelvic girdle that were found only in mammal-like reptiles, he drew attention to several features that were distinctively mammalian. True, the mammary glands were atypical, but he left no doubt that the females had nipples capable of expressing milk; and he confirmed that both sexes had warm blood and true diaphragms.

To some, these discoveries might have been enough to grant platypuses a place among 'proper' mammals. But most naturalists quickly realised that they actually made classification more difficult.

What they had revealed was an apparently irresolvable contradiction. On the one hand, it was obvious that, if an animal had mammary glands, its young were born in need of being suckled. This suggested that it either gave birth to live offspring (like humans and whales) or produced eggs, which hatched within the body (like seahorses). But on the other hand, it was thought that, if an animal had a cloaca, it laid eggs (like chickens and lizards) and that most embryonic development took place outside the body. In this case, the embryos were nourished from a yolk and – presumably – needed no suckling. It was almost impossible to imagine that any creature could have functioning mammary glands and lay eggs. It had to be one or the other. And, depending on which, the platypus would either be a mammal or something else.

Everyone took sides. Whereas Meckel was convinced that the platypus gave birth to live young, the English naturalist Richard Owen argued that the eggs remained inside the body and Geoffroy Saint-Hilaire doggedly maintained that eggs were laid. What they needed was evidence. There were plenty of reports, of course. For years Aborigines and Australian colonists had claimed to have seen platypuses incubating eggs. But naturalists put little faith in hearsay. Nor were they inclined to trust the 'samples' that were sent to them. They had been gulled one too many times to fall for that one. In 1829 Saint-Hilaire had been tricked into believing that

a tortoise egg had come from a platypus; and Owen had wasted hours dissecting two eggs which turned out to belong to a lizard and a snake.

The Egg Man

The only way of resolving the puzzle for certain was either to identify a genuine egg or, better, to capture and kill a pregnant female. To this end, Owen asked George Bennet, the Curator of the Australian Museum, to start shooting likely animals. But no matter how many platypuses Bennet bagged, his quarry eluded him. Indeed, by 1860, he was worried that if he carried on he might actually drive the platypus to extinction.

It fell to William Caldwell to settle things. And when he did, his telegram sent shockwaves through the biological world. It read: 'Monotremes oviparous, ovum meroblastic.' In other words, platypuses laid eggs, with large yolks – just like birds and reptiles. But crucially, the embryos inside were already highly developed, with rudimentary vertebrae and differentiated brains – suggesting that they had also been retained inside the mother for a certain period and required nurturing after hatching.

Confounding all expectations, this proved that, while the platypus was indubitably a mammal, it belonged to an order all of its own, far more primitive than all the others. Long ago, they must have branched off from the last common ancestor of mammals and reptiles, developing some distinctive new characteristics, but without fully shedding their



Partly mammaly:
*Ornithorhynchus
anatinus*. 19th-century
coloured engraving.

simpler past. At a stroke, this redrew evolutionary history – and obliged naturalists to rethink the development not just of mammals, but of all animal life.

For all the trouble it caused 19th-century biologists, the platypus remains a delightfully strange creature. Indeed, its very strangeness is perhaps the source of its charm.

Alexander Lee is a fellow in the Centre for the Study of the Renaissance at the University of Warwick. His latest book, *Machiavelli: His Life and Times*, is now available in paperback.

ROTTING AMONG THE TSETSE

The British government sought to hide the brutality of its conduct during the Kenya Emergency. Previously hidden files reveal an unpalatable truth. *Niels Boender*

BEHIND
THE TIMES

In the years before Britain's former colonies – from Ghana to Malaysia – gained independence, thousands of documents were quietly removed from the record to safeguard the 'honour' of the British Empire. A decade has now passed since the British government was forced to admit that it had stolen and hidden these files. Now held in the National Archives, they were unearthed during a lengthy legal proceeding brought by former Mau Mau detainees claiming compensation from the British government for atrocities committed during the eight years of the Kenya Emergency.

The Mau Mau uprising was an insurgency predominantly among the Gikuyu people of central Kenya, initiated in 1952 with the declaration of a State of Emergency by the British colonial government on the

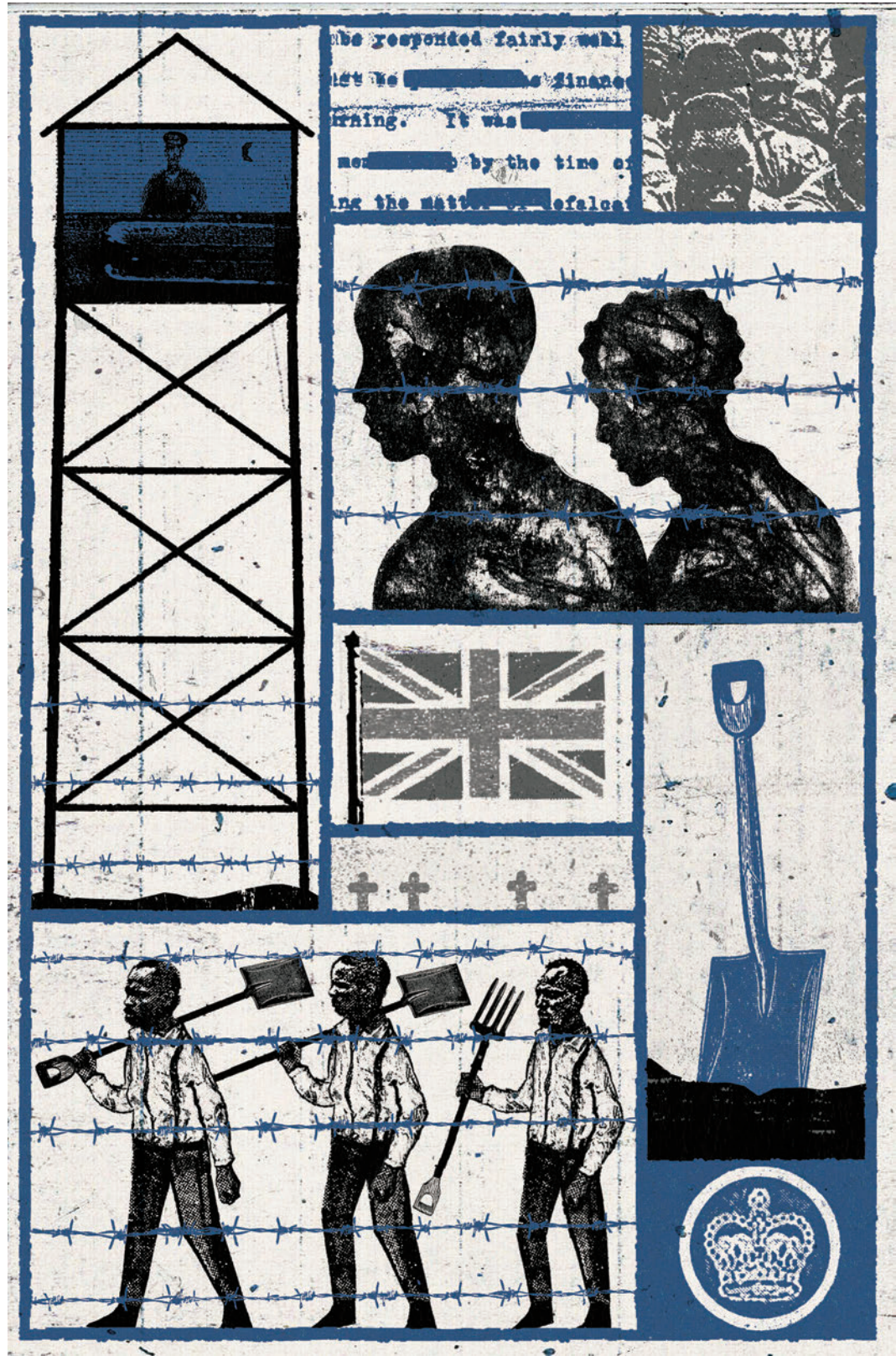
urging of a small white settler minority. Motivated by land seizures, intrusive administration and their educated nationalist leaders, thousands of men and women from central Kenya took to the forest and mountains to fight for 'land and freedom'. There, they fought the British for several years in a gruelling guerrilla war that saw the deployment of both British and African forces. Alongside the active conflict, the colonial administration launched a repressive campaign to control the so-called 'passive wing' of Mau Mau. Citizens in the villages of the 'Native Reserve' were herded en masse into 'Emergency Villages' and over 80,000 individuals were detained without trial.

The files reveal the institutionalisation of violence in a series of detention camps erected by the colonial government to 'rehabilitate'

former Mau Mau. In the words of the colonial attorney-general, they were where the 'dregs of the Mau Mau barrel' were left to 'rot among the tsetse'. Beyond shocking incidents of brutality, including punitive beating, waterboarding and electric shocks, the files show the justifications used by the colonial officials who implemented them, as well as the detainees' resistance and the government's ever more desperate responses. These powerful African voices were suppressed during the war and, with the removal of the archive, silenced. Ten years on, historians have now begun seriously to consider their implications for the study of colonial violence.

Stuck in the Pipeline

Colonial violence was never an end in itself, but a method of achieving stability and control.



BEN JONES

The 'Pipeline' – the system of detention in camps without trial employed by the colonial government to suppress Mau Mau – was no exception. 'Rehabilitation' was supposed to reconcile detainees to continued colonial subjugation. Through hard labour, confinement and, in multiple cases, physical brutality, detainees were induced to confess to their adherence to the Mau Mau cause and only thereafter were released. In order to be freed, detainees also required the endorsement of officials in their home districts, which meant that so-called 'politicals', avowed nationalists who vociferously opposed colonial rule, became stuck in the Pipeline. To solve this problem, the colonial state conceived a scheme of exile, whereby these 'unacceptable' detainees would start new lives far from their home communities. Through this process, colonial officers believed that Kenya would be pacified on their terms. It was hoped that, by giving the exiles 'a hut and four acres' and a quiet family life, rehabilitation might take place within a generation.

As early as 1954, two years into the Emergency, the War Council, Kenya's highest executive body, proposed the creation of a settlement for exiles on the Red Sea island of Kamaran. The plans were initially rebuffed by the Colonial Office as not being in 'the sphere of practical politics'. Nevertheless, a new location at Hola in Coast Province was agreed upon. This was to become a settlement for 7,000 'irreconcilables' on 25,000 acres of freshly irrigated land,

where the government would spend 'large sums of money in turning an arid desert into green pastures and a land flowing with milk and honey in order to accommodate those Mau Mau detainees'. Irrigating the land required a huge amount of labour; however, and while a few dozen rehabilitated 'unacceptables' were found, the task also required the assistance of a group of un-rehabilitated 'hardcore' Mau Mau. They were transported to Hola and housed in a specially built closed camp. It was hoped that these workers would become settlers after they had been rehabilitated by forced labour. As such, Hola came to be seen as the solution for reconciling the irreconcilables and allowed other camps across Kenya to close.

Hola hell

The grand 'social experiment' pursued at Hola, however, was marred from the start by difficulties and resistance from the men forced to live there. As petitions and letters from the few dozen exiles illustrate, life was harsh. They were there involuntarily; having confessed and thereby having made it to the last stage of the Pipeline, they had been hauled back to exile. Andrew Ng'ang'a Munya, for example, claimed he had been certified as never having supported Mau Mau, having been through the harshest camps in the Pipeline. Yet he had been plucked 'from [his] motherland to [this] hellish place' because local officials held a grudge against him. Munya claimed loyalists wanted to steal his land and had opposed his release for

this reason.

Land was central to the ambitions of both settlers and those detainees who had not been rehabilitated, the latter refusing to take up plots at Hola 'so long as there was a good prospect that land in the "Highlands" would soon be available to them'. This refers to the so-called 'White Highlands', a fertile area where land was owned by a small group of European settlers, which the Gikuyu people claimed was stolen during the colonial conquest. Settlers on the scheme also complained bitterly about conditions on the Hola plots, 'doing a daily drudgery', the purpose of which was to 'make them run short of blood by slave labour on land which Europeans [planned] to farm later'. Exile to Hola could not transform the desires and suspicions of the detainees, who remained fuelled by the desire for land and political independence. Even the land itself seemed to resist the scheme, with large subsidies needed per acre to allow farmers' subsistence. Yet the scheme persisted because of its 'political importance'.

Letters hidden in the 'migrated archive' reveal that, over the years at Hola – especially in late 1958 and early 1959 – violence became more prominent as efforts to rehabilitate the closed-camp detainees became increasingly desperate. Local officers believed that the failure to rehabilitate this last group was 'one of the major political problems of [the] country today'. The settlement scheme required more rehabilitated detainees to dig irrigation trenches in an effort to make

Hola economically feasible, while the coming end of the Emergency meant it was politically impossible to continue detaining large numbers involuntarily. By 1956 the active phase of the conflict with Mau Mau was effectively over, with only a few hundred Mau Mau stragglers remaining in the forest. However, the colonial administration was left with tens of thousands of detainees behind the wire. Opposition came from the Conservative government in Britain, who were facing ever more vociferous questioning from Labour MPs and tired of having to foot the costly bill of the Emergency. Yet, once the State of Emergency ended, the Kenya government would lose access to the panoply of legal powers that allowed mass detention without trial and would have to release all un-rehabilitated detainees. From 1956 until the end of the Emergency in February 1960, this palpably affected colonial administrators, who resorted to ever more desperate measures to rehabilitate detainees.

Forced to be free

Letters leaked from Hola to the Labour MP Barbara Castle told of the systematic beating of at least 13 detainees for refusing to work in the closed camp during August and September 1958. The confined detainees wrote that men would be taken away, brought back 'weeping, crying and [at] last dying'.

Officials, however, believed that officers had been too good-humoured and 'postponed a definite trial of strength' with the closed

'In the Cowan Plan, the philosophy of rehabilitation reached a paradoxical conclusion: the "irreconcilables" would be forced to be free'

camp detainees. To break this apparent lethargy, the Cowan Plan was drawn up, predicated on the idea that detainees could be forced to work – for instance by having warders hold detainees' hands and force them to pull weeds. This would supposedly 'break the hold of the oath' tying them to the Mau Mau cause and open the way to releasing them onto the settlement side of the scheme. In the Cowan Plan, the philosophy of rehabilitation reached a paradoxical conclusion: the 'irreconcilables' would be forced to be free.

On 3 March 1959 the Plan was implemented with tragic consequences. Almost inevitably, the forced labour escalated to beatings and led to 11 deaths. Hola, the 'land of milk and honey', ranks alongside Amritsar as one of Britain's darkest imperial atrocities. The killings were a natural product of the exile

policy's relentless logic: the transformation of people into ideal colonial subjects through coercion.

What the previously hidden files reveal is that the idealism of late colonial governance was itself directly to blame for the violence of the Emergency generally and at Hola specifically. Colonialism, especially in its final stages, was an ideology that presumptively claimed foreign rule was best for the subjects it governed. Authoritarian measures to perpetuate that rule, including exile and violence, followed logically. Moreover, colonial officials claimed to know 'their subjects' better than they knew themselves, a belief underpinned by a relentless racial hierarchy. At Hola this ideology met the immovable force of detainees' resistance, resulting in bloody violence.

Return the files

Important lessons about empire are thus found in these files. However, their location in the National Archives themselves perpetuates another colonial injustice. Kenyans need to be able to tell these stories for themselves. As debates about artefact repatriation are increasingly prominent, archive repatriation should also be considered. The files were removed to edit the history of Britain's rule in Kenya. This history should be restored.

Niels Boender is a PhD Student at the University of Warwick working with the Imperial War Museum on the legacies of the Mau Mau conflict in Kenya.

THE GLOBE

Globe in office of
Chiang Kai-Shek
in Taipei, 1961.



SOLVING THE INSOLUBLE



The Partition: Ireland Divided, 1885-1925

Charles Townshend

Allen Lane 340pp £25

*Review by
Maggie Scull*

This is the final volume in Charles Townshend's trilogy tracing Ireland's path to independence from Britain, which sets his earlier works on the Easter Rising and the revolutionary period in greater context. The partition of Ireland, seen by some as the only possible settlement of the 'Irish question', occurred during a period of simmering sectarian tension and British political confusion. As with his earlier publications, Townshend provides a highly authoritative account of the events leading to Irish independence, while also reflecting on the United Kingdom's most recent constitutional crisis, which had profound consequences for both the UK and Republic of Ireland: Brexit.

Townshend expertly crafts the narrative of how Britain impacted on Ireland, and vice versa, throughout this tumultuous period. Wider factors were also at play, not least British imperialism. For example, Townshend writes 'the national trauma of the Boer War brought an interrogation of British identity' and this then played out in both nationalist and unionist behaviour, with nationalists 'almost all instinctively pro-Boer'. During the Boundary Commission negotiations of 1924-25, some unionists questioned the right of Catholics to land, 'claiming, like the Afrikaners, that it had been empty when their ancestors arrived'.

A hundred years later, northern Irish nationalists would identify themselves with Black Africans and South Africa's non-white population during apartheid. As Townshend illustrates, this cultural piggy-backing was part of a wider trend for some Irish nationalists to 'eliminate British cultural influence' in an effort to 'de-Anglicise' Ireland. All of this helps to set the stage for the impact of, and opposition to, the Third Home Rule Bill of 1914.

An aspect that sets this book apart from many others in the field is the author's acknowledgement of the sectarian tensions underpinning the lack of progress on the Home Rule issue. Religion and religious institutions are seriously engaged with as motivating factors for division and misunderstanding. For example, Winston Churchill favoured the Home Office over the Irish Chief Secretaryship in 1910, claiming 'the Catholic Church has ruined every country in which it has been supreme'. While Irish Protestants feared a papal takeover, Irish Catholics worried about proselytism from the Protestant churches. The threat of either was limited, but the 1907 decree by Pope Pius X requiring children of 'mixed' Catholic and Protestant marriages to be raised in the Catholic faith, added to unionist fantasies of Home Rule leading to a Catholic Church takeover. Townshend argues the decree remained significant for its 'political resonance', rather than any determinable impact on the very small number of mixed marriages during this period. The 1911 papal rescript of *Quantavis diligentia*, forbidding Catholics to bring any priest before a civil court without his bishop's permission, heightened concerns that Catholic members of the Dublin parliament would be wholly subject to and under the control of the Church. With the Irish Catholic bishop's 'near paranoia' over the issue of Catholic education in the newly formed Northern Ireland we see the issue of religious control continue. Townshend's careful reconstructions of these debates adds greatly to our understanding about the role of religion and religious institutions throughout the Home Rule process.

Townshend deftly describes how the Home Rule crisis ran out of control, acknowledging that both unionists and nationalists were being whipped into a frenzy by internal and external forces. The phenomena of 'Ulsteria', identified with the Protestant Orange Order marches,



Never: members of the Ulster Unionist party sign a covenant on 'Ulster Day' as part of their campaign to halt the passage of the Third Home Rule Bill, 28 September 1912.

‘Townshend expertly crafts the narrative of how Britain impacted on Ireland, and vice versa’

continued to ramp up tensions between communities on cultural, language, political and religious grounds. As early as May 1912, former military officers began training members of the Ulster Volunteer Force (UVF) and reports of arms shipments to the paramilitary organisation circulated. Unlike other scholars, Townshend focuses on British popular mobilisation against Home Rule and not only the debate in Ireland. As tensions rose, Townshend takes us to the brink – the genuine fears on both sides of the Irish Sea over civil war in response to the Third Home Rule Bill. It would be the First World War that paused the threat of violence in Ireland. Yet, as Townshend argues, from this point on there could be no ‘possibility of implementing Irish Home Rule without the exclusion of some part of Ulster’. The stage was set.

Townshend focuses on the perspective from Westminster during the negotiations that took place throughout the First World War. This gives us a political backstory rich in nuance. The detail surrounding the Cabinet’s decisions on the Government of Ireland Amendment Bill of 1918 clearly demonstrates a step on the path to partition. At times, the reader could be forgiven for reflecting on events a century later that seem strangely familiar.

Partition created a physical and mental division in Ireland. Southern unionists wished not to be divorced from their Ulster counterparts. Partition would also bitterly divide Irish nationalists, resulting in their own civil war. Through official records and newspaper reports Townshend recreates the intimacy of these violent repercussions, when neighbour fought neighbour and whole communities were torn apart.

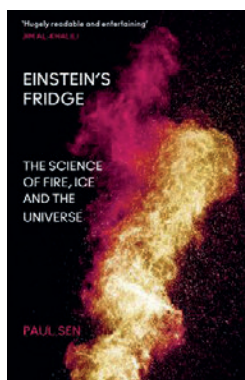
While his *Easter 1916* (2005) gave us the story of one fateful week, *The Partition* covers four decades and focuses overwhelmingly on matters from the perspective of high politics. Combing meticulously through British and Irish government archives, newspaper reports and political memoirs, Townshend weaves together a narrative of how politicians responded to events in Ireland. Townshend is able to reveal long simmering tensions, as well as specific sparks in the Irish Home Rule journey, a drawn out and messy divorce.

Townshend argues that partition remained the only answer to the Irish Home Rule crisis. His dissection of discussion on the ‘hazy’ details surrounding the Boundary Commission feels familiar to contemporary news readers, including issues around a North-South customs barrier. The ‘potent’ metaphor that unionists soon saw the new Northern Irish state as ‘under siege’, part of a long line of siege mentality, was heightened by unionist insecurity over ‘faltering’ British support. Partition is regularly seen as a rushed, error-filled process that no one wanted. Yet Townshend challenges any view that a better arrangement was possible, highlighting throughout the severity of unionist ‘hostility’ to Home Rule, which many nationalists saw as ‘illusory’. While federalism existed as the ‘most sophisticated’ alternative to partition, Townshend deems it ‘well beyond English political capacity’ at the time. Therefore, Townshend argues, even the imperfect and highly volatile solution of partition was the only answer. One wonders how much has truly changed if, in light of Brexit, issues of sovereignty, trade agreements and the border continue to cause tension between politicians in the House of Commons today.

Maggie Scull’s latest book is *The Catholic Church and the Northern Ireland Troubles, 1968-1998* (Oxford University Press, 2019).

SCIENCE

MORE HEAT AND LIGHT



Einstein's Fridge: The Science of Fire, Ice and the Universe

Paul Sen

William Collins 320pp
£20

Review by Seb Falk

So fundamental is thermodynamics to modern science that C.P. Snow, in his landmark 1959 essay ‘The Two Cultures’, made ignorance of the Second Law of Thermodynamics the scientific equivalent of never having read any Shakespeare. ‘This law is one of the greatest depth and generality’, he later wrote. ‘It has its own sombre beauty: like all the major scientific laws, it evokes reverence.’

Yet, as Snow himself noted, the opaque name, ‘thermodynamics’, is a curse. It obscures the simple beauty of the theory of entropy, which is fundamental to the existence of time itself. Its universality and its usefulness have captivated scientists from James Joule to Stephen Hawking. Their stories are told with panache in *Einstein's Fridge*.

Paul Sen brings the personalities to life: complex, fallible characters, sometimes inspired, sometimes misled by their powerful intuitions. He details the thought experiments of Rudolf Clausius and James Clerk Maxwell – imaginary scenarios that could be incredibly fruitful, when physical tests of hypotheses were often inconclusive – and he adds rich analogies of his own to help explain the developing theories. More importantly, he puts those theories into context. From the need for efficient steam power in Joule’s family brewery, to the

biblical reading that inspired Lord Kelvin's prediction of the heat death of the universe, to the demand for low-carbon energy today, Sen highlights the varied social, economic and institutional conditions that shaped science over more than two centuries.

'The history of science is the history that matters', Sen argues, and this ambitious book, replete with diagrams, is both history and science. Yet its publisher brands it 'popular science'. Snow's *Two Cultures*, it seems, remain with us: history of science is still seen as not quite history, consigned to the science sections of bookshops and presented on TV by scientists rather than historians (as if only serving generals fronted documentaries on the world wars).

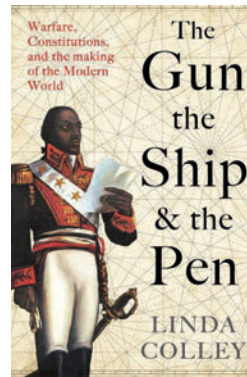
As a TV producer, Sen has made some captivating, nuanced documentaries about the history of science. And (apart from its rather half-hearted referencing) *Einstein's Fridge* mostly avoids the pitfalls of some pop science books, Ladybird-style stories of isolated geniuses plucking ideas fully formed from thin air. At times, perhaps, it is overambitious. The latter parts of the book, surveying the broad applications of thermodynamics in the 20th century, offer less of the cultural context that makes the opening sections on entropy so rich; the sketches of more recent scientists, such as the 'inspiring' Hawking, seem a little one-dimensional. And while acknowledging that Einstein's genius has been mythologised, Sen cannot resist repeating the time-worn story that his stint in the Swiss Patent Office gave him nothing more than time for blue-sky thinking. It may have been undemanding, but the patent system also offered Einstein a stupendous vantage point to survey the cutting edge of electric science and technology.

The shifting relationship between science and technology is at the heart of this book. Thermodynamics is the epitome of how science, counter-intuitively, follows technology: the inventors of steam engines and refrigerators did not yet understand the science that made them work. But Sen also stresses what the science of thermodynamics contributes to technology and presents a compelling case to rehabilitate this unattractively named field. Thermodynamics is great science and it is great history, too.

Seb Falk is author of *The Light Ages: a Medieval Journey of Discovery* (Allen Lane, 2020).

GLOBAL HISTORY

THE POWER OF THE PEN



The Gun, the Ship & the Pen: Warfare, Constitutions and the making of the Modern World

Linda Colley

Profile 502pp £20

Review by
Charlie Laderman

In the late 18th century, in the capital of a vast and still expanding empire, delegates assembled to discuss a major political text. Drawing on the principles of Enlightenment philosophers, this document was committed to the establishment of a uniform legal code and the enhancement of religious tolerance. The deputies convened with the express purpose of promoting a 'sense of liberty', but their deliberations would do little to advance the position of their country's large slave population.

Rather than an account of the 1787 Philadelphia convention that drafted the US constitution, this gathering occurred two decades earlier in Catherine the Great's Russia. After 18 months of rising before 5am to craft her *Nakaz*, or Great Instruction, the empress brought together 564 deputies in Moscow to discuss it. Of course, this commission's aims were severely restrictive. As the French philosopher Denis Diderot complained, from its first line 'a well-made code should bind the sovereign' and Catherine's *Nakaz* did nothing of the sort. Yet the commission that poured over her work was progressive in other ways. It comprised men of relatively modest means and from diverse multi-ethnic backgrounds, including some who were non-white and

non-Christian. Even more radically, the electorate that chose this commission included female landowners, ensuring greater recognition for women than occurred in either revolutionary America or revolutionary France.

This is just one of the political experiments discussed in Linda Colley's remarkably wide-ranging and beautifully written history of the development of written constitutions. Stretching from the Seven Years War to the First World War and spanning the world from Corsica to Tahiti, Colley's book is a truly global account of how constitutions became an almost ubiquitous 'political technology'. But it is about much more besides. While other historians have emphasised that modern constitutions emerged primarily from rational, lawyerly discourse and elevated, literary societies, central to Colley's thesis is that 'war, the persistent threat of armed violence and written provisions for wider male democracy were all necessarily intertwined'. More than just a story of constitutions, this book also encompasses the causes and conduct of war across the long 19th century, as well as the spread of European empires, the growth of nationalism and the emergence of an interconnected, international society.

Colley's work is packed with fascinating vignettes, such as the fact that Moses is mentioned almost 650 times in Diderot's *Encyclopédie* or that George Washington checked the Swiss jurist Emer de Vattel's *The Law of Nations* out of a New York library in 1789 and had still not returned it by the time he died a decade later. Yet these stories are not simply isolated trivia. They are woven into a remarkable intellectual history that illustrates how constitutional clauses and political principles were disseminated across historical periods and political boundaries, entering into documents far removed from their original context. As Colley notes, referencing the historian William McNeil, 'it is easier to borrow than it is to invent' and, across history, the drafters of constitutions would frequently 'pick and mix' from earlier texts.

Catherine the Great, for example, having plagiarised extensively from the Enlightenment philosophers, would work to ensure that her *Nakaz* was translated widely and read outside of Russia in a bid to showcase her regime's modernity. By 1800 there had been 26 editions, in ten different languages, and its translators

inserted their own political ideas into the text, converting the *Nakaz* into a far more radical statement than it was in the original Russian. Michael Tatischeff, a Russian official based in London, produced an English translation that explicitly used the word 'constitution', a term that did not appear in the original and would, in fact, not spawn a Russian equivalent, *konstitutsya*, until the 19th century. Nor was the *Nakaz* alone in this regard. Other absolutist rulers, such as Frederick II of Prussia, would also promote their texts abroad only to see them altered in more enlightened directions.

As well as casting new light on well-known historical figures by setting them in a broader international context, Colley also introduces readers to fascinating and largely neglected individuals in global constitutional history. There is Henry Christophe, for example, 'an uneducated Black artisan, turned drummer boy, turned innkeeper, turned butcher', who served as a general in Haiti's independence struggle and then proclaimed himself 'the first crowned Monarch of the New World'. Christophe's deployment of a constitution to establish a hereditary monarchy might initially seem contradictory. Yet, as Colley reminds us, there were many such rulers, including Napoleon Bonaparte, to whom Christophe claimed 'near relation', who creatively combined monarchism and constitutionalism.

As would be expected from one of the pre-eminent historians of Britain, Colley is particularly illuminating on the role of the world's oldest constitutional monarchy in these developments. The absence of civil war after 1700, coupled with Britain's relative mastery of the 'hybrid-warfare' of the era – combining military proficiency on land and at sea – ensured not only considerable political stability at home but also a measure of 'constitutional quiescence and complacency', contributing to the country's resistance to a codified constitution. Overseas, however, Britain was a far more revolutionary actor. In particular, London, as the prime global metropolis, attracted activists and political reformers from across the world, who used its unrivalled connections to spread their revolutionary ideas. While the Marxist historian Eric Hobsbawm famously argued that Britain was the principal engine of modern *economic* revolution after 1789, Colley demonstrates convincingly that London's fiscal strength and

**Radical reactionary:
Allegory of the Empress
Catherine II with the Text
of Nakaz, 18th century.**



naval power also made it a hub for constitutional radicalism, promoting political changes on ‘a transcontinental scale’.

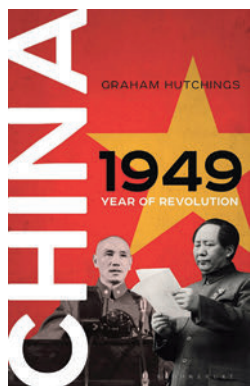
Many of Britain’s citizens, without their own domestic political constitution to experiment on, would look outside their country’s borders for outlets for their constitutional creativity. Most ambitious was Jeremy Bentham, who corresponded with political revolutionaries across the world and yearned to draft documents for their new states. ‘The globe is the field of dominion to which the author aspires’, he would portentously declare in 1786. Yet Bentham was far from alone in his desire to craft constitutions for other societies. One of the American Founding Fathers, Gouverneur Morris, based in Paris at the time

of the French Revolution, would discover this when, in the midst of penning his thoughts on a new constitution for France, he was interrupted by an unnamed Frenchman, presenting his own proposal for a revised US constitution.

Whereas today the writing of constitutions is largely the preserve of government officials and lawyers, Colley shows us that it was once also ‘as much a mode of literary and cultural creativity as writing a poem, a play, a newspaper article or, indeed, a novel’. In *The Gun, the Ship & the Pen*, Colley demonstrates that the chronicling of constitutions can also be an art form.

Charlie Laderman is Lecturer in International History at King’s College, London.

NEW YEAR'S REVOLUTIONS



China 1949: Year of Revolution

Graham Hutchings

Bloomsbury 336pp
£22.50

Review by
Michael Dillon

For the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) 1949 was the year of liberation from foreign oppression and feudal backwardness: the beginning of New China, an optimistic vision shared by many non-communists. For their opponents, the year represented the loss of China, as Chiang Kai-shek's rump Guomindang Nationalist regime fled to Taiwan after its defeat in the civil war. Victorious on the field of battle, the CCP had much experience of revolutionary activity but little of government. It found itself confronted with the task of ruling and modernising 500 million people, mainly peasant farmers.

Graham Hutchings, a respected China correspondent, notably for the *Daily Telegraph*, has written a persuasive and readable narrative of that critical year, accurately emphasising the catastrophic shortcomings of the Nationalists and of Chiang Kai-shek that contributed to their defeat.

The beginning of the end was the apparent resignation of Chiang Kai-shek as president in favour of Li Zongren of the Guangxi warlord faction, his deputy and bitter rival. The characters of these two adversaries and of Bai Chongxi, a Hui Muslim warlord, also of the Guangxi clique, are portrayed vividly. Chiang appeared to be a devout Christian, although many suspected that this was

for international public consumption. His style was tyrannical, but he never acquired sufficient power to rule as a dictator, operating primarily as a manipulator of Guomindang factions.

After the carnage of the civil war and the collapse of confidence in Chiang Kai-shek, the Communist victory came as no surprise. On 22 January 1949, the Nationalist General Fu Zuoyi surrendered Beiping (later Beijing) to the People's Liberation Army (PLA). Chiang Kai-shek was technically 'in retirement' and his erstwhile Guangxi allies were attempting to oust him. While Chiang's confederates were busy transferring financial assets and critical resources to Taiwan – including libraries, archives and what would later stock the National Palace Museum in Taipei – Bai Chongxi was diverting what he could to his Guangdong base.

The PLA crossed the Yangtse and established control over city after city, replacing the Nationalists in Nanjing with little difficulty as their greater competence became apparent. In Guilin, protesters demanded that Li Zongren sue for peace with the CCP, but he remained acting president, forming a new cabinet in June 1949. When Bai Chongxi made a desperate last stand in Guangxi his army was cut to pieces. Li Zongren fled to the United States.

Mao's new world beckoned but Chiang still desperately sought US aid, unable to accept his failure. As PLA forces surrounded the wartime capital of Chongqing, Chiang made a hasty and unseemly exit. On 3 November, he flew out to Chengdu and then, ten days later, to Taiwan. On the island, his last hope, the incoming and largely unwelcome Nationalist regime proclaimed martial law, which remained in force until 1986. Chiang's bankrupt regime could not survive without the support of the US, but this was far from certain until the Korean War, when Taiwan became a military base and a valued Cold War ally for the Americans.

Hutchings has drawn on valuable Chinese sources and first-hand accounts in English, although it is a pity that one of the most powerful, Derk Bodde's *Peking Diary*, is not cited. *China 1949* brings this critical year to life and is a good starting point for understanding how the People's Republic of China developed.

Michael Dillon's latest book is *Zhou Enlai: The Enigma behind Chairman Mao* (I.B. Tauris, 2020).



ACROSS THE GREAT DIVIDES

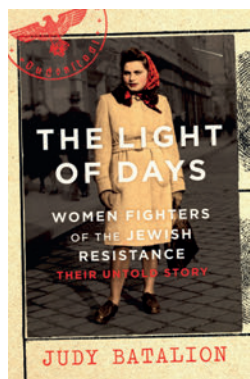


Among the nation's many achievements – gunpowder, paper, printing and the compass included – China also has good claim to being the world's covered bridge capital. Some 3,000 such structures built with wood, brick, stone, ceramics and metal remain standing, more than in any other country. These remarkable features of an often inhospitable landscape are documented in *China's Covered Bridges: Architecture Over Water* (University of Hawaii Press, 480pp, £60), the first book in English on the subject and the result of 15 years' field research by Ronald G. Knapp, who has worked on China's cultural and historical geography since 1965. Generally referred to as 'corridor bridges' (*langqiao*) and 'wind-and-rain bridges' (*fengyuqiao*), Chinese

structures differ from those in the west, eschewing wooden trusses and often supported by complex timber arches or masonry bases. Pictured above, the Rulong Bridge ('Like-a-Dragon bridge') was built in 1625 in Qingyuan County, Zhejiang Province, a mountainous region that has more covered bridges than anywhere else in China. The twin Zimei ('Sisters') Bridges (left) were built on the banks of the Chaping River in Sichuan Province in 1873. Described by Knapp as China's most 'extraordinary surviving covered bridges', for many years they were accessible only via a dirt footpath. The section of river they cross is now a water rafting destination.

SECOND WORLD WAR

GHETTO GIRLS



**The Light of Days:
Women Fighters of
the Jewish Resistance**

Judy Batalion

Virago 558pp £20.00

*Review by
Julie Wheelwright*

Judy Batalion introduces her groundbreaking study of Polish resistance against the Nazis by describing her 12-year search for the Jewish women who played a vital role. What she uncovers, in excoriating and poignant detail, are the stories of the 'ghetto girls' who paid off Gestapo guards, hid revolvers in loaves of bread and messages in their pigtails and fought in armed struggles. These women, their beliefs, their friendships and their extraordinary sacrifice emerge from the shadows. Without sentimentalising their achievements and the price paid for the risks they took to save their families, friends and community, Batalion's collective biography provides a significant contribution to Holocaust history.

While dozens of women carried out rebellious acts, which consisted of everything from espionage missions for Moscow to flirting with Nazis, or bribing them with whisky, wine and



pastries, a handful form the book's narrative arc. The most detailed story is that of Renia Kukielka, who was among the few who survived, escaping to Palestine in 1944. With her sister Sarah, the Kukielka sisters were couriers for Freedom, one of the prewar youth movements that provided a network for the resisters. Renia's memoir, published in 1945, is a rare first-person account bearing witness to the women's motivations, their ingenuity in surviving, their loyalty to their comrades and the losses they suffered.

When the Nazis invaded their hometown of Będzin in 1939, the Kukielka family had fled to relatives in nearby Jędrzejów where they were later forced into a ghetto, one of the 400 established throughout the country. With her 'Polish looks' and an education that had given her fluent Polish, Renia Kukielka was able to acquire fake documents and return to Będzin,

Found family: three unidentified Jewish women in the Kutno ghetto, Poland, 1940, by Hugo Jaeger.



where she joined the resistance, networks of young Jews who ‘created a novel kind of family life to help heal from the ones that had been destroyed’.

In 1943 when Kukielka and her comrades received news of the Warsaw ghetto’s armed uprising, they knew that deportation was imminent and their own resistance escalated. It was then that Kukielka became a Freedom courier, carrying cash to buy food, medicine, weapons, transporting bullets in innocuous jars of jam, or bribing guards and the police. But living under an assumed identity required them to participate in antisemitic conversations and maintain a light-hearted tone as they did so: ‘We couldn’t cry for real, ache for real, or connect with our feelings for real’, wrote another courier, Chasia Bielicka. ‘We were actors in a play that had no intermission.’

Yet the opportunities their disguises afforded

them were remarkably effective. Bela Hazan, a courier based in Grodno, was assigned by an employment office to work as a translator for the Gestapo. There she joined ‘master courier’ Lonka Kozibrodzka, who travelled throughout Poland transporting weapons, documents and even an archive.

If the Polish Jewish resistance achieved relatively modest victories, Batalion argues that it was much larger and more organised than historians have previously recognised. Her welcome research and fluid storytelling fit a larger, still emerging historiography, which reveals the breadth of women’s agency during armed conflicts and, as she writes: ‘A different version of the women-in-war story.’

Julie Wheelwright is the author of *Sisters in Arms: Female Warriors from Antiquity to the New Millennium* (Osprey, 2020).

The Historian Embodied

Dressing in historical clothes can reveal things about the past that no book can. *Suzannah Lipscomb*

When TV producers suggest that I put on historical costume, I tend to recoil. In part

this is so as not to step on Lucy Worsley's toes and I'm sure it's partly vanity; certain I really wouldn't suit a gable hood (the Tudor headdress that looks like a jewel-encrusted birdhouse). But it's also about wanting to be seen as a 'Serious and Proper' historian: and dressing up doesn't seem to help that cause.

I couldn't, however, escape the latest offer and although, at first, I felt a bit foolish, I learnt much from it. For it turns out there is a world of difference between an intellectual and an embodied understanding and I learnt things that I could never have otherwise known.

It might help to imagine what I'm talking about. Women's clothing in early 16th-century England consisted of a large, low-necked, linen smock or undershirt. Stockings were held up under the knee by tied ribbons and the flat leather shoes had a single strap, like a pair of school Clarks. Over this went a fulsome woollen petticoat, with built-in padding at the hips or a separate 'bum roll' and then – like the petticoat, put on over the head – a kirtle. This was a sort of dress or tunic that laced up at both sides from under the arms to the waist. On top of this was a gown. It hung to the floor and laced up at the front over the chest and stomach, although that

lacing was hidden by a pinned- or sewn-on stomacher. The gown actually had two sets of sleeves: a pair of foresleeves that were tied on with laces and fitted close to the forearm and a pair of oversleeves that were voluminous and draping. On top of the hair, tied back with a central parting, went the hood, normally over a linen coif.

First I was struck by what was unfamiliar: the strangeness of wearing shoes with no heel, the heavy weight of the garments bearing down on my hips – much like carrying a toddler in a backpack – the need to hold my head erect to keep the hood in place and, because it affected my peripheral vision, the necessity of turning my head to look around me, rather than just using my eyes. I soon discovered that two women can walk beside each other, but one cannot follow closely behind another, for fear of treading on the other's train. I wonder if there is a metaphor here. These were all things that would have felt normal to someone used to wearing these clothes from childhood.

What also became clear, though, was the need for servants. You need a servant to dress: the three sets of lacing, the need to be pinned or sewn into the stomacher, the sheer impossibility of putting on shoes under those skirts if you haven't done so at the start. Once dressed, you also need a servant to do anything weighty or physical that needs doing. In portraits of Tudor women they



Suzannah Lipscomb is author of *The Voices of Nimes: Women, Sex and Marriage in Early Modern Languedoc* (Oxford University Press, 2019), host of the *Not Just the Tudors* podcast and Professor Emerita at the University of Roehampton.

Tudor threads:
A Young English Woman, by Hans Holbein the Younger, 16th century.

bend their elbows and hold their hands meekly together. I now know that it was not just a way of flattering the waist but because, in a gown, that's about as far as one can lift one's arms. There will be no reaching for things on high shelves. No wonder that women who did physical work wore only the smock, petticoat and kirtle. It is also clear to me that films that depict intimate scenes with clothing taken off are wildly inaccurate. If there was a flicker of passion to satiate, there would have been no scrambling out of these clothes, only a scrabbling under.

The heavy clothes were also very warm: hot on a cool April day, surely stifling in July. While European temperatures dropped by the 1560s, it has been calculated that the highest daily temperatures in the 1540s were hotter than 2003. Though natural fibres breathe, I still don't know how they coped. I feel for women who experienced the menopause or pregnancy in 1540 (for these clothes, unlike ours, would easily have accommodated a bump).

These reflections, and many more, jolted me out of seeing this as 'costume'. These were clothes, not costumes, and the clothing of the past can help us, in unexpected ways, to imagine ourselves into their world. Wearing Tudor clothes felt like serious and proper historical research. It taught me more than reading about them had ever done. And that I was right – I really don't suit a gable hood.



GLOSSARY

'No word was ever as effective as a rightly timed pause'
Mark Twain

Alice's Adventures Under Ground p.77

Charles Dodgson gave 12-year-old Alice Liddell the manuscript of what would become *Alice's Adventures In Wonderland* in November 1864. Following her husband's death, Liddell auctioned it for £15,000 in 1928. In 1948 it was donated to the British Museum by its then American owners, in appreciation for Britain's war effort.

Dred Scott decision p.22

US Supreme Court ruling against Dred Scott on the grounds that Constitutional rights did not apply to African Americans. 'Slavery lives in this country not because of any paper Constitution, but in the moral blindness of the American people' – Frederick Douglass, May 1857.

Hugo Jaeger p.105

An early adopter of colour photography, though better known as one of Adolf Hitler's personal photographers. In 1945 Jaeger buried his photographs near Munich, selling them to *Life* in 1965.

Morganatic marriage p.60

A marriage of social unequals, where the privileges of one partner are not shared by their spouse or children. Popular with Chinggis Khan, the Romanovs and others with privileges to protect. 'I married beneath me. All women do' – Nancy Astor.

Musical Alfred p.30

The Great Man's life was once more celebrated in song in Isaac Pocock's *Alfred the Great; or, The Enchanted Standard*, a 'musical drama' first performed in November 1827. 'The incidents of the disguised king ... are culled from the best authorities ... with the licence usually permitted in a melodrama.'

Oscar 'firsts' p.27

Film to win Best Picture: *Wings*, 1929; non-Hollywood film to win Best Picture: *Hamlet*, 1948; actor to reject their win: George C. Scott,



'Morgantic marriage'

Patton, 1971; deaf winner of an award: Marlee Matlin, *Children of a Lesser God*, 1986; female winner of Best Director: Kathryn Bigelow, *The Hurt Locker*, 2010.

Pripet Marshes p.56

Or, Pinsk Marshes: 104,000 square miles of wetlands at the border of Belarus and north-west Ukraine. Historically a friend to those in hiding (including 600 Jews from the Łachwa Ghetto in 1942) and a foe to military forces. Various drainage proposals have been touted, including by Adolf Hitler and the Soviet Union.

Reproduced paintings p.5

'Around 1900 technical reproduction had reached a standard that not only permitted it to reproduce all transmitted works of art ... it also had captured a place of its own among the artistic processes.' – Walter Benjamin, 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction', 1935.

USS Quaker City p.47

The first American cruise ship to enjoy a Mediterranean voyage earned her sojourn: built in 1854, she was purchased by the US Navy and enforced the blockade on Confederate ports. After a busy Civil War, she joined the Haitian navy in 1869 and was lost near Bermuda in 1871.

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ON THE SPOT ELEANOR ROBSON

We ask 20 questions of leading historians on why their research matters, one book everyone should read and their views on historical drama ...



Eleanor Robson is Professor of Ancient Middle Eastern History at University College London, former chair of the British Institute for the Study of Iraq and Director of the Nahrein Network for Iraqi heritage.

Why are you a historian of the ancient Middle East?

I wanted to start at the beginning of the history of mathematics and numeracy. Thirty years later, I'm still not done with cuneiform culture.

What's the most important lesson history has taught you? That 'the past is now'.

Which history book has had greatest influence on you?

E.H. Carr's *What is History?*.

What book in your field should everyone read?

Karen Radner's *A Short History of Babylon*.

Which moment would you most like to go back to?

To late 1990, to persuade George Bush Sr to find another way to get rid of Saddam Hussein, one which didn't lead to war, ISIS and decades of poverty, oppression, chaos and terror for Iraqis.

Which historians have had the greatest influence on you?

Jim Secord and Simon Schaffer.

Which person in history would you most like to have met?

The Iraqi archaeologist and historian Taha Baqir (1912-84).

How many languages do you have?

Akkadian, Sumerian, Hurrian, Old Persian; French, German, Arabic, Italian and Spanish.

What historical topic have you changed your mind on?

What haven't I?

Which genre of history do you like least?

'Ancient' history that pretends

Greece and Rome are all that matter can get in the bin.

What's the most exciting field in history today?

The revival of local history, antiquity and heritage in Iraq.

Is there an important historical text you have not read?

Almost all of the Western canon, but I try to keep on top of my own field.

What is the most common misconception about your field?

That cuneiform script is impossibly difficult to read and that 'the Ancient Near East' is a useful category.

What's your favourite archive?

The 150 cuneiform tablets that I'm deciphering, excavated by the Ur Regional Archaeology Project at Tell Khaiber, Iraq.

What's the best museum?

The Iraq Museum in Baghdad, but it needs support.

What technology has changed the world the most?

For the better: writing.
For the worse: oil.

The Mediterranean or the Indian Ocean? Both.

Historical drama or documentary?

Drama, every time!

The Parthenon or Machu Picchu? Machu Picchu.

What will future generations judge us most harshly for?

Letting a privileged few destroy our planet for short-term greed.